

The Mystery of the Kailash Trail



Book One
Bharat Bhushan

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Pre-publication draft manuscript

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About the book

The oldest mystery known to the Oriental World. It is said that nobody dares to venture out to walk on the Kailash Mountain. And it is also said that those who walked up the mountain, never returned. In all these centuries, they have gone within, never to return.

About the author

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books, inside the internet, and deep within the mind.

I

Ramesh Kulkarni was always patient with his son, Vijay. He knew that his son would never listen to any advice. After all, to his adventurous, mountaineer, rock-climbing, himalayan thrill-seeker son, Ramesh would always be the middle-class, old-city retiree who had returned from an active service in the army and settled in his ancestral house, Pune. *"It will always be Poona for me,"* thought Ramesh to himself.

"Vijay, be careful," said Ramesh, shouting hoarsely by habit into the telephone, *"DD News TV Channel says that the weather in Kashmir and Nepal is getting worse. Do you have to do your trek tomorrow? Can you not postpone it?"*

Vijay laughed into the telephone. Ramesh could hear it clearly. Vijay said, *"Relax Papa, and please do not shout into the telephone. This is not your trunk-call long distance telephone call. How many times do I have to tell you? These are modern telephones. I can hear you clearly, as though you are inside my alpine tent, here at our camp at Manasarovar."*

Ramesh smiled and spoke more slowly, *"Vijay, the news says that it is going to get bad in the entire region above the Garhwal Himalayas. And you say that I am in your plastic tent? Absolutely not. You know that your mother here does not allow me to even take my morning walk in the Deccan Gymkhana grounds if it was drizzling at*

night. The only way I will reach Manasarovar is if kidnapped by force by my Army Regiment and taken there by helicopters."

Vijay enjoyed his father's plight. He knew fully well that his mother was very careful and paranoid about their health. She had always maintained that it cost less to be careful and she was not going to be found giving away the family savings to medical doctors. She had never done so, thought Vijay. His mother would always go to her cousins, who were physicians, homeopaths, ayurved doctors and included one who was a specialist in treating arthritis.

Ramesh repeated again on the phone, "*Vijay, I know you will not like to listen to your own father. If you were here, I could have scolded you, and your mother would have made you feel guilty by crying out her tears. But we are in Pune. Gita, your mother and me, and you are far away in Manasarovar, inside a cold and wet plastic tent. So take care, and keep calling us whenever you can. Wait a minute. Your mother wants to talk to you. Please talk to her.*"

Gita got up slowly and came limping on her painful arthritic feet. Her hands were however faster and seemed to compensate for the slowness. She grabbed the phone from Ramesh, and spoke to Vijay in a patient voice, "*Hello. Your father is scolding you again. That means you are probably doing fine and well.*" Vijay replied, "*Mama, please tell Papa not to keep saying that I am in a plastic tent up here in the Himalayas at Manasarovar. This is an alpine tent. It is designed to help me stay here without suffering in these extreme conditions.*"

“Yes. Yes. I know that. But, be careful out there. The weather out there is supposed to worsen tomorrow. What do you plan to do? Are you going on the pilgrim walk-area, the ‘parikrama’, and return to camp? I have heard that it takes four to five days to complete the entire walk around the Manasarovar lake” Gita said, *“I hope you are cautious and sensible tomorrow. Will it be possible to talk to us from there? You do know that both your parents are old people, living alone and totally concerned about your well-being?”*

Vijay felt awfully homesick at that moment, with his mother’s reminder. *“Mama, do not worry. I have never been a foolish trekker. I do not go out to become a hero. My entire group wants to return back to Pune and we want to return alive and in good health. We are very careful. We are very well equipped,”* he continued, speaking in a very confiding tone, to reassure his mother, *“And, Mama, we will not go out of our tents, not plastic tents, tell Papa, alpine tents. We will not go out if the weather is bad. I promise you. Tell Papa. Tell him not to worry. You should also not worry.”*

Gita Kulkarni smiled at hearing her son’s assurance. She turned to Ramesh and said, *“O father-of-Vijay, your son has promised that he will not go out of his alpine tents if the weather is bad. Do not worry. He is asking you not to worry.”* Talking to her son over the telephone, sounding happy and content, she said, *“Vijay, I have told your father not to worry. You do not tell me not to worry. I cannot stop worrying. But do call. I will keep the phone down now. OK?”*

Limping back to her bed, Gita felt happy but worried. She knew her son very well. She knew that her husband,

Ramesh, would also continue to worry. Their son had never implemented any of his promises and had never been one to refuse an adventure or a challenge. She felt that he would be tempted to venture out of his tent in bad weather only because his parents had asked him to be cautious. Vijay did not know what it was to be cautious. He was sensible, well planned, meticulous and a good team leader. Cautious, he was not.

She looked at Ramesh, and knew that he was wondering about the same aspects. He looked up at her, understood the unspoken message, the hidden worry and the obvious concern and nodded in agreement. He raised his hands in exasperation upwards, in prayer to God and stood up to get his medicines. On his way to the medicine box that was placed conveniently on the dining table, he turned to the prayer room and bowed low with his hands placed together in front of his forehead, and prayed, *“O Shiva, O Mahadeva, O Maheshwara, you are the nearest to Vijay right now. He is in your territory. He is in your protection. Please take care of him. We have no one else to ask help from. Only you can help Vijay and us. Om Namah Shivaayaa. Om Namah Shivaayaa. Om Namah Shivaayaa.”*

Ramesh wondered about the situation. He had heard about the weather forecast from the DD News Weather Channel on television. It was a government news channel and they would get their information directly from the meteorology departments and institutions. They were more reliable than all the other private news channels. Nobody worried about the upper Himalayas. The other ‘newsy’ channels seemed to be more intent on showing climate news about rain in New Delhi, about flooded roads in Mumbai and rising tides in Chennai.

This was another aspect of modern India that irritated Ramesh totally. He could never keep up with the change of names of cities and towns. They should allow people to use both the names, he would emphasise and keep arguing with his friends.

He stopped in front of the dining table, trying to recollect the reason he had come to collect something. He was forgetting more and more stuff nowadays. Did he come here to drink water? There was an empty water jug on the table. He would have to get some water from the tap. He did not like to drink cold water from the refrigerator. Why did he come to the dining table? He had just about eaten lunch, only an hour ago. Newspapers? They were kept neatly folded, with their crease intact, from his breakfast reading. He would take them away only after his evening cup of Tea. So why did he come to the dining table, he wondered.

Gita kept looking at him. She was getting worried. This was happening only too frequently to Ramesh. She did not want to help him out, but she feared for him. She used the next best option. She called out, *“O father-of-Vijay, can you get me my medicines and ointments? And while you are at the dining table, can you bring me some water after you have taken your medicines?”* Ramesh understood the message only too well. He knew his wife and knew that she was worried. He replied, *“This Vijay, he has made me nervous and forgetful. I will have to talk to Dr. Atul Kulkarni, our homeopath. He will know what to do about my new habit of forgetting things. I do not want to get dementia. Atul will understand. He is not from your side of the family, na? He is from the sensible side of the family. Ha Ha Ha Ha.”*

Gita pretended to look annoyed. She will have to talk to Dr. Atul Kulkarni before Ramesh went to his clinic. She could convince Atul to give some sensible medicines to Ramesh. She would also have to get some medicines from him for her arthritic pain that seemed to suddenly shoot up from her knees. The ointments were not helping. Not helping at all.

Sometimes Norbu felt that he would be better back at home at Darchen with his parents at their small store, selling stuff to the pilgrims who came up to the pilgrim paths of this sacred mountain. Judging by the plight of his situation now, at dusk, with the dark rain-storm clouds coming up the *Kang Renpoche* mountain, Norbu wondered if he would have been much better off in continuing with taking care of the small barley farm plot at their native hamlet away from Darchen. He was not at Darchen, Norbu kept reminding himself. He was in this small canvas and tarpaulin tent, pitched in a small rocky depression, waiting out the night at Dirapuk Gompa.

He was not alone, Norbu thought to himself, and smiled. He had good company, and they were his very good friends of many years. He had known them both since their childhood and they had enormous faith in him. The fourth one in this small tent was a new friend, and yet the other two had accepted him, even if he was unlike them. For that matter, even Norbu was unlike the two yaks that snuggled against each other in this small tent.

The fourth one in the tent was a Tibetan Mastiff pup, less than two years of age. In all appearances though, the Mastiff looked more dangerous than the yaks.

Norbu began to prepare for cooking dinner inside the tent. He had seen to it that the yak had grazed on the meadows below the Dirapuk Gomba after the pilgrims had gone to rest in their alpine tents. The yak were content and so was the Mastiff, having been able to get to some meat from the eateries that were in the numerous tents near the Gomba. Norbu dug a hole into the ground inside the tent and arranged fist-sized rocks within it. The hole was about ten inches deep and was soon filled up with brushwood and twigs that he set fire to. Reaching into a dirty cloth bag, he pulled out a couple of dried-out yak dung cakes and added them to the fire.

The warmth of the fire inside the tent felt good, and the rocks lining the hole helped make it better. The yak began breathing more comfortably, thought Norbu, and patted the Mastiff away from the fire. Dinner for him was always taken away from the group of pilgrims and his own boss and master, who stayed in the alpine tents. Norbu and other yak boys like him stayed in makeshift tents and sheds through the night with their animals. It was a strange group of living beings that made sure they survived through the night. Yaks, mules, ponies, mastiffs and yak boys lived together within this small mini-village that sprung up around the Gompas, the government managed guest houses, the private tent areas and the eateries.

Norbu, like other yak boys, stayed through the night with his own animals. The two yaks that he had with him

in the tent were owned by his family, and had been brought from their native hamlet from the valleys away from Darchen. His parents kept a small herd of yak at Shiquanhe, near Darchen, and his younger sisters tended to their grazing and other care. He had brought the two yaks on hire to the pilgrim guides for the entire season, to help the pilgrims do the *kora*, the pilgrimage that circled the great mountain of *Kang Renpoche*. The pilgrims from India called it the *Kailas Parbat*, while his own Tibetan villagers called it the *Tise*.

Cooking dinner each night by himself, Norbu always felt homesick. He longed for the warm food that his mother would be cooking at this time at Darchen. He knew that his mother would be thinking of her son away on the *kora* around *Kang Renpoche*, and she would wonder if by a miracle he could join the family for dinner. For Norbu, his dinner was a makeshift combination of *Tsampa*, with a bowl of hot watery tea and grilled barley flour. To this, he added some not so rancid butter from a plastic pouch and sprinkled salt with a liberal pinchful. He had kept some water to heat up on the fire, and he drank it up after gulping down the hot *Tsampa*.

He could hear the wind gathering in strength and they could smell the rain clouds that were gathering around the *Kang Renpoche*. It would be bad tonight, and what if the rains continued the entire day tomorrow? They were lucky that they could put up their tents and sheds inside this group of rocks on high ground. They would be safe from the gale and the heavy winds. He had come this on this path over the past four years, ever since his father had thought it wise that he should learn this strange new trade of the pilgrimage path. The barley crops were failing and his family had lost their ownership of the few

stone silos that his grandfather had constructed to store the harvest from their village. The local government appointed village headman had handed over the ownership to a settler from Kashghar on promise of more income to the village account.

The yak boys knew the winds and the camping grounds on the *kora*. This pilgrim group was a slow moving one and it made for good income to the families that provided the yaks, ponies and mules. They usually stayed at Dirapuk Gompa, about three kilometers away from the Dolma Pass, and at the meadows near Tarboche. Sitting in his tent, made of tarpaulin, canvas, plastic sheets and strong edge cloth, Norbu wondered at his life of the past four years. He had scavenged most of the tent material from pilgrim camps, of stuff that had been left behind and from material that the policemen at Shiquanhe confiscated or picked up from illegal visitors. He could not have afforded the tent to accommodate two yaks and a yak boy, if he had to purchase it.

From within his tent, Norbu could see the high peaks of *Kang Renpoche*, or *Kailas Parbat*, as the pilgrims called it. The winds were blowing the pale white clouds around the high peaks. The snowcap of *Kang Renpoche* was shining in this dark dark dark night at Dirapuk Gompa. He could not even see the pilgrim camp in the meadow below this rocky hideout, but the snowcap of *Kang Renpoche* was brilliant. The moon was out of its shadows and had come up in front of the peak, a not-so-thin crescent, with the clouds seeming to try to chase it away. There were waves and waves of clouds that kept throwing the moonlight back and forth on the smaller peaks.

In turn, the lower peaks seemed to twist and turn like a mighty snake around *Kang Renpoche*. The drizzle seemed to have begun on the peak, and it made the snowcap look even brighter. It was raining heavily on the meadows below the Dirapuk Gompa. Norbu wondered about the day to come. Would they be able to take the pilgrims on the *kora*? If it rained here, in these high plains, it meant bad roads and a bad day on their path to the Dolma Pass and then onwards to Zutulpuk or Zuthrul Phug Gompa. They may have to stay somewhere on the way if the pilgrims could not keep up with the speed that they would be required to maintain. It may be wiser for them to stay in the higher grounds of Dirapuk Gompa than to risk walking through the Dolma Pass.

His parents would worry about his health on such nights, but they would not be scared for him, Norbu thought to himself. He was visiting so many *neys*, and these sacred places would not be places of danger to him and his yaks. His family knew of the Tibetan Mastiff pup that had begun to accompany him from Darchen. It had come up, skinny and starved, to his parents shop near the *neykhor* in Darchen, and Norbu had fed it from the meat waste that his mother had salted to store away. The Mastiff had fallen in love with the salty taste and seemed to have signed away his life in devotion to Norbu. He had never left him and always looked up in love, though it looked very ferocious and dangerous, even when moving about peacefully.

Norbu had wanted to become a monk, but his parents had refused him permission. The local monastery had agreed with his parents. He was here, now, at night, waiting out the rain, in a makeshift tent at Dirapuk Gompa, with his yaks and mastiff. He wondered about

the *Kang Renpoche* and the various stories that he had heard about the mountain from his parents, from the pilgrim guides, the pilgrims and the policemen of Shiquanhe. Nobody dared to climb the mountain. Nobody even dared to walk up to its foothills. The local policemen, monks and villagers kept a watch out for anyone who would try to do so. They said that nobody had ever returned.

His parents sold the *neyigs*, the guidebooks to the local sacred places. He could read some of these books and heard from others who could read properly. It spoke of the veneration that all religions had for *Kang Renpoche*. He had met pilgrims of all types. Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Bon Pos. They came here to walk the *kora*. Some walked from Darchen to Tarboche to Dirapuk Gompa to Dolma Pass to Zutulpuk to Darchen, while some pilgrims walked it the other way around. It was good money for the work that took up some months. His family needed it to support them through the winter when there would be no work. It was all due to the sacred peak of *Kang Renpoche*. Norbu could see the peak from within his tent, in this night, with the gathering rainstorm, and he bowed his head in prayer, asking its blessings for a safe *kora*.

The lone Chinese policeman at the roadside eatery outside Darchen on this stormy night wondered about the odd couple sitting by themselves at a dining table hidden away from the wood-fire. A Buddhist monk and a Sikh sitting together certainly looked very suspicious in this heartland of western Tibet. As if the recent riots were not the end of troubled days, he wondered about what these two strange and unlikely companions were talking about. Better to make sure, he thought, and gestured for the eatery owner to come across.

It was an eatery, a store, and a safe house for pilgrims' travel and camping equipment, a parking space for rent for vehicles and also had a ramshackle shed alongside that doubled up as a stable for yaks, ponies, horses and mules. Every activity of this eatery was illegal, thought the Chinese policeman. But, every service provided by this eatery was an essential life support system in these hostile lands of Darchen, the gateway to the Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash, as the waves of Hindu pilgrims from India kept reminding him.

The eatery owner came up to the policeman and smiled, for he had to, and asked, "O Shenshe, would you have some more hot soup and grilled bacon? We made a new bowl just now." The policeman nodded, for the hot soup would be very welcome in this night that promised of a storm, a strong windy hailstorm possibly, tomorrow. The soup would help him get through this night. He could not go into the town of Darchen in this rain. He had brought his bicycle inside the eatery to prevent it from being blown away. Or stolen, he smiled, by the poor Tibetan pilgrims from the neighbouring valleys.

The cycle was propped up against a steel-black hummer with Lhasa number plates. The sleek 4-wheel turbo enhanced vehicle had been brought inside the eatery to prevent it from being damaged by the hailstorm. There were two land rovers parked close to the hummer. The dining tables had been moved aside to allow for the vehicles to be brought inside for protection. The eatery owner would be paid for the service, would be paid handsomely.

The policeman nodded towards the Buddhist monk and the Sikh pilgrim sitting away from the others in the dining hall. The eatery owner understood the policeman's unspoken question and shouted out to the Buddhist monk, "O Master, do come over here, into the warmth of the wood fire. I will get you some hot soup and rice with curried potatoes. Shenshe here, our policeman friend is about to take a new bowl of soup, and he can do with some advice and guidance from you. Get your friend from India also to sit near the fire. We will get him some more food."

To his surprise, the Buddhist monk and the Sikh pilgrim came over without a word of protest and without any delay. They came over to Shenshe's dining table, if it was to be called that. The table was actually a long plank of thick wood, covered with a plastic sheet nailed to it with card paper. The plank was resting on stone blocks on either end. There were lower stone blocks on both sides of the plank to serve as chairs. For Shenshe, the eatery owner had provided some luxury. He had covered the stone block with a pile of clothes to serve as a cushion.

To his further surprise, Shenshe realized that the Buddhist monk was a stranger. For he knew most of the monks in the region, and this Buddhist monk was certainly not from the Darchen or Shiquanhe area. His robes were also different. So he was not from any of the local monasterial orders. The Sikh seemed to be a holy type of pilgrim. This was certainly getting to be very strange, thought Shenshe. He introduced himself to the two holy men, “O Masters, welcome. I am Shenshe, and I am the police custodian of this place and the nearby settlements along this road from Darchen. You two do not seem to be from here. Are you both pilgrims then?”

The Buddhist monk bowed low in greeting and sat at the table. The Sikh holy man also bowed, with his palms together in front of his chest, and took a seat next to the monk. It was the Buddhist monk who answered, “Brother, we greet you with the spirit and friendship of our peoples. Hot food will certainly be welcome. I am Tibetan, but born in India. My grandparents had settled in the sacred land of Bodhgaya and I am a monk from the monastery at Nalanda, where the most enlightened one taught many hundred years ago. My Sikh brother with me is Sardar Amarpal Singhji, from Amritsar, from the holy temple of his people. He hopes to become a holy man of his religion in the future, but for now has come to this land in search for answers about his Master.”

That was certainly a new one, thought Shenshe. He had never heard such a story for an excuse in all his monitoring the local Buddhist monks and their activities. He asked, “It is certainly an honour to be in the presence of two holy men, such as you. What does the Sikh pilgrim seek? And why do you accompany him? Do you

also seek answers about the Sikh religion? Why does he seek your help? Why here, of all places, Darchen or the *Kang Renpoche*, the Kailash Mountain, as he would perhaps call it?"

Pilgrims, local Tibetan vendors and the eatery owner and his wife gathered around the three men, in anticipation of a good story and of allowing the stormy night to pass them by while they heard the Buddhist monk talk, for he had come from the holy land of the most enlightened one. The monk knew what was expected of him, and he gave himself up to the eager faces of everyone waiting to hear him speak. He said, "I do not know much of the religion of my companion, but what I have learnt from him over the past ten days, I cannot but compare the similarities that we seek in our lives, the messages that we are custodians to from our masters before us, and the path that we provide for one and all in our temples, monasteries and sacred places everywhere."

"My brother from Amritsar comes here to the land of *Kang Renpoche*, as you know it, the Sumeru Mountain, as he would declare, to visit the monastery of *Guru Rinpoche*, the Precious One, the Lotus Born, he who is also known as *Padmasambhava*, a manifestation of the *Amitabha Buddha*, and was resident below the great mountain. My brother, Sardar Amarpal Singhji, is a holy man from Amritsar, or he will soon be, comes in search of the knowledge about his first Master, Guru Nanakji, who came here many hundreds of years ago. I will allow him to say of his search."

The Sikh pilgrim spoke in Hindi, and yet all those gathered here understood him, for it was the search in his eyes that helped them realize the sanctity of his

words, and he said, “My brothers here, I bow to you, for you are all fortunate, to be in this most sacred of all holy lands. Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Bon Pos and all Tibetans alike, this land of Kailas, this birth place of the mighty rivers. I come from Amritsar, from the holiest temple of our people, in search of knowledge of my beloved Master, Guru Nanakji. He came here in his journeys, some say he came from Ladakh, and some say he came from Sikkim. Whatever anyone would say, he did come here and stay, and taught of his way of understanding and knowledge to the people.”

“The Tibetan Buddhists have regarded my beloved Master as a saint. The Buddhist followers of that time learnt from his teachings. It is said that he was known as the *Rimpoche Nanak Guru of Punjab*, and not much is known of this part of his journeys, his third journey also known as his third *Udasi* when he stayed near the *Kang Renpoche*. It is said that there would be stone inscriptions in the monasteries and *gompas* in this area telling us of the journey of my beloved Master. I come in search of such knowledge that would help me speak of his journey here. It is possible that the inscriptions would be in Hindi or my language, the Gurmukhi, and therefore would not have been understood by the local people here.”

The Sikh pilgrim continued, “O brothers, I bow to you, again. Do let me know if you know of those who could help me or guide me. I come in search of knowledge. It is said that my beloved Master helped the local king to reconstruct some damaged monasteries. He was honoured for his help and guidance and teachings given here. There are also those who would say that my beloved Master, Guru Nanakji, the *Rimpoche Nanak*

Guru of Punjab, was the also a manifestation of *Padmasambhava* himself. There is also the mention that it is perhaps only Guru Nanakji, who actually went up the Sumeru Mountain and returned. This knowledge would perhaps be found in the monastery of *Guru Rinpoche*, on the path from Tarboche to Dirapuk Gumpa and Dolma La.”

So saying, the Sikh pilgrim sat in prayer, and began to recite, “*Ek Omkar...*”

Everyone who came in search of him called him “Maharaj”. It was his actual name. His name was Hariram Maharaj. He had explained his name once. It seems that his given name was Hariram while he had been given the title ‘Maharaj’ because of his skill in making very tasty vegetarian Gujarati-Rajasthani style food of Western India. All good cooks in his land were called ‘Maharaj’, he had explained very humbly. He had also added, after a while, that the word ‘Maharaj’ meant ‘the King of Kings’, which of course, he was not.

And then the story of his life began to get more complicated. It was too much for the eatery owner at Shiquanhe to understand. He knew that India was a very large country and that the Hindu, Sikh, Jain and Buddhist pilgrims from that land were different from each other. He had also begun to understand over the many years that he had operated this tented eatery

outside Shiquanhe, that Indians within the Hindus or the other religions were also very different from each other. He had himself come over from Quinhai, a town at some distance from Shiquanhe. But he knew his fellow Tibetans and the ever migrating Chinese.

Some Indians would come into his eatery in the early years, and would ask for vegetarian food, which he had not known would be an exclusive demand. He began to cook vegetarian food for them. And then other Indians came who demanded that the vegetarian food had to be cooked in separate utensils from the ones where he cooked meat or fish. His wife was from Yushu, and she understood this demand from the monastery near her village. The monks at the monastery were very strict vegetarians and they had demanded that the eateries nearby served vegetarian food cooked from separate utensils. She had convinced him to separate the utensils. It would mean more customers, and these strict vegetarians usually paid much better. Her advice had been correct and he had profited from the separation of utensils.

Later, came the demand from larger pilgrim groups and tour companies from Kathmandu that they would bring clientele on an exclusive basis if he were to employ a Indian cook who knew there demands and tastes and understood the need to employ strict vigilance on bringing forth the 'strictly vegetarian Hindu' food. He had understood their need and he did not argue for the pay was good and prompt. There were no credit dealings here and the requirements were growing to such an extent that it would be adequately profitable to accept and adapt. After having employed more than ten different cooks from India, of all types, including ones

from Nepal and Bhutan, who claimed they knew ‘strictly vegetarian Hindu’ food, he had discovered the Maharaj.

It was the other way around, for it was the Maharaj who had come in search of Luo Tsering of Quinhai, the owner of the tented eatery that had a very gaudy painted signboard that read “Strictly Vegetarian Hindu Food (cooked separately)”. He had introduced himself in the pidgin Tibetan+Chinese+Hindi+English that he had picked up in his stay in the various cities in Ngari. He wanted to stay on in Shiquanhe, he had explained, and he wanted work. He could cook the ‘strictly vegetarian Hindu food’, he said, and moreover his name was the best certificate that he could proclaim to all Hindu pilgrims to the Kailash Mountain and the Lake Manasarovar.

Luo Tsering and his wife had planned on running a simple tented eatery out on the pilgrim path from Shiquanhe to Darchen and they had started with the simple local Chiang cuisine, and restricted themselves only to culinary delights at dinner such as cow hoofs or cheese. They had added on Sichuan and Xinjiang cuisine depending upon the season and the movement of Chinese troops and policemen or pilgrims from other parts of Tibet. They had done well but the income was largely being spent on surviving in this harsh climate on the snowy deserts of the Tibetan Himalayas. The pilgrims from India had changed their income and profit margins and the eatery had grown into a parking area and tenting ground.

The demand for very exclusive vegetarian food had surprised him, and he had imagined it to be that of a very small group of pilgrims. What he had not realized was

that most pilgrims visiting Kailash Mountain would not even dare to accidentally pollute themselves or their pilgrimage by the proximity of non-vegetarian food. Hariram Maharaj had helped them out enormously, Luo thought, for he had taken over the entire section of cooking, managing and hosting the Hindu pilgrims from India. Maharaj had also searched for and trained three helpers, leftover pilgrims from Nepal and India, to work in the vegetarian section.

Sometimes they would sit to relax, in-between pilgrim groups, and they would chat. It was usually never a discussion, for it was Hariram Maharaj who would talk without a stop. Luo found it very difficult to understand whatever Maharaj would explain about himself. There was very little else that Maharaj would talk about. It was either about him, or nothing. Maharaj explained stuff in a very specific sense of geography, culture, religion and the diversity of India, all of which never seemed to make any sense to Luo. He listened quietly, because it seemed to be useful to pick up some of the phrases and words, and in understanding and respecting the diversity of these strange pilgrims from the lands below the Himalayas.

Maharaj explained that his name meant ‘King of Kings’, but he was not one. He cooked Gujarati-Rajasthani food of Western India, but he was not a Gujarati or a Rajasthani. He had worked in a Gujarati household of a very rich businessman, where he had cooked for more than forty members of a very large family that lived in a single house. They had begun to call him ‘Maharaj’, and he had become known to the neighbourhood by that name. His Master, Seth Walchandbhai Shah, had been a devotee of a holy man from Rajasthan, who had his

ashram in some place near a big river called the Narmada. This river did not flow in Rajasthan, but the holy man had established his ‘gompa’, as the Maharaj had described it to Luo, to help him understand. Upon a request from the holy man, his Master had asked him to work at the ashram and cook Rajasthani food. The Seth had continued to pay for his salary, and the title ‘Maharaj’ had followed him there.

Pilgrims would regularly visit the ashram to do the *kora*, the pilgrimage on foot around the entire length of the Narmada River. They would stay overnight at the ashram, and tell stories about the world outside the kitchen. Maharaj had however begun to attend the sermons and lectures of the holy man and had begun to practice yoga, especially the Hatha Yoga that was taught here. It was taught to a select few, and it was a rare practise, Maharaj explained to Luo. It was about the breath, and about breathing or how not to breathe – Luo was getting confused here and found it all very vague and difficult to keep up – and about meditation and concentration and about inner consciousness and postures and something called *asanas*, as Maharaj kept explaining.

A group of Hindu monks, or sadhus, from the ashram decided to do the *kora* around the Narmada River, and Maharaj had sought permission of the holy man to accompany them. He had finally found his calling, he said, for the freedom in walking out along holy shrines and sacred places, with fellow pilgrims, was utter and total bliss. The pilgrimage on foot around the Narmada River had taken several long days, or a couple of months – Luo forgot this detail – and Maharaj realized that he could no longer stay back in the kitchen in the ashram.

One of the ashram monks on the Narmada *parikrama* or *kora* had explained to Maharaj about the Kailash mountain and the abode of Siva, the eternal.

The ashram sadhu had explained that the Kailash *parikrama* was the ultimate expression of devotion, and the closest that one could get to reach Siva. It was the most difficult and the toughest. The sadhu was totally certain that Maharaj could never even dream of reaching Kailash or doing the *parikrama*. He had predicted that it was in Maharaj's fate-lines on his palm that he would not amount to anything and he would not achieve any form of greatness. This outright rejection had spurred him, and he had complained about it to the holy man.

The holy man had been compassionate and understanding. He had told Maharaj that the Kailash *parikrama* was not the ultimate test. The final challenge was in completing 108 *koras* around the Kailash Mountain, or walking 108 times around the sacred peak. If one would achieve this, and if one would practice the strict adherence to meditation and concentration through Hatha Yoga, then one could get admittance to the very secret sect of Nath Yogis within the hidden hill slopes of the Kailash Mountain. He had understood his calling, and he had arrived at Shiquanhe to wait for his time. Each year he completed about five *koras*, but he would do more the next year, he said.

“Drolma La” shouted his grandfather, upon sighting the Pass and pointed out to his grandson. It happened each time, thought the young man, smiling at the excitement of his grandfather. They were returning from Darchen and the clouds were gathering over the mountain pass below the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain. Yeshe was worried about the coming rains. It was unusual for the clouds to gather in such strength in this time of the year. What would happen to the *kora*? What would the pilgrims walking the *kora* do about sheltering or waiting out the rain? Most importantly, what would his parents do at Dirapuk with the shop and camping site that they set up each year?

Yeshe was returning with his grandfather, Sangye, who was also known as the “Great Old Qinhai Nomad Horseman”. Seated on their trusted mules, they were leading four yaks, loaded with trading goods, eatables, medicine boxes, matches and salt (most important), and boxes filled with religious memorabilia that pilgrims would purchase from them to keepsakes of their *kora* around the *Kang Renpoche*. Bzanba and Kangryi, Tibetan Mastiff dogs, who knew their job on these rocky paths around the great mountain, were herding the yaks. They had done these tasks efficiently over the past many years that the family of Sangye came to Dirapuk.

The old man looked at the dogs with affection. He had known their parents and their grandparents and their great grandparents and their great great grandparents. After all, was he not known in all of Qinhai and Nagre provinces as the sacred custodian of the *Tsang Khyi* breed of the Tibetan Mastiff? Both, Bzanba and Kangryi, were of the true gene line of the *Tsang Khyi*, through they were not of the provinces of Qinhai and the

Darchen-Shiquanhe areas. The *Tsang Khyi* breed was known from the Cuomai, Jiazha Sanru, Cuona and the Longzi areas. European fanciers of the Mastiffs, and the rare Russian, usually ended up staying for a couple more days in their camping rent-sites at Dirapuk, wanting to learn from the old man about the Mastiffs and hoping to strike a bargain to see if he would commit to selling their pups.

To Yeshe and his parents, Bzanba, Kangryi and the other two *Tsang Khyi* Mastiffs were very loyal guard-dogs and helpers with the yaks, mules, ponies and the Qinhai horses that they brought with them all the way from Tsaparang, near Zanda. Each year, Sangye traveled with his family to the *Kang Renpoche*, to establish his trading station, camping site and shop at Dirapuk. It took them a number of days and several halts to reach the *kora* trail stops. They usually established their small settlement away from the trail, higher up, amongst the rocks and walls of the hills at Dirapuk. Their shop was almost at the level of the Drolma La Pass, and on clear nights on this sprawling flat wilderness, the lights could be seen as a welcome sign to the pilgrims walking rapidly down the path in the late evenings.

Over the years, the locals at Dirapuk had made space for the great old man and had begun to recognize his arrival as a good omen for the trade of the area. Sangye commanded tremendous respect in the region though he was only a nomad horseman and it was in his trade to breed, nurture and sell horses in Tibet. He never sold the Tibetan Mastiffs to foreigners, for it was against his religious beliefs to allow the breed to go out of Tibet. The Mastiff had come to Tibet with the Living Buddhas. They were worshipped with the Living Buddhas in some

monasteries. Yeshe suspected that the old man had a secret network through which he distributed the pups to trusted custodians and breed-protectors whenever a new litter arrived.

They made good time riding on the mules rather than walking. The yaks preferred to walk without being chased by their owners. They seemed to pretend to be watchful of the Mastiffs, but Yeshe knew that they were all good friends. He was happy to see the groups of pilgrims resting near the shop run by his parents. They were of all sorts here, who knew the wisdom of seeking high ground away from the pilgrim trail at Dirapuk. The slow moving hill streams and the innocent looking marsh grounds could turn dangerous after a stormy night. There were poor Tibetan pilgrims from all over the region, in groups with their sign-flags held high to let their members know of their common resting place for the night. In contrast, there were the rich Scandinavian trekkers and mountaineers who had set up their tents in the enclosures given to them.

There were Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims from India, gathering inside large tents set up by their tour companies. These tents were set up at the beginning of the season, and the companies kept bringing in new groups of pilgrims, sometimes two groups in a week, and sometimes three, if the weather held well. They had their own style of cooking and they brought their cooks and helpers. The Europeans brought their noodles, beans, meat, fish and water and used the utensils and allowed Yeshe's mother to cook for them. The Tibetan pilgrims brought bags of their foodstuffs and used makeshift cooking areas in the camping site to cook their food.

Yeshe began to unload the stuff from the yaks with help from the Darchen boys that his father had hired upon arrival. They rushed in and out of the main storage shed that they had made against the rock wall behind their cooking tent. Freed from their goods, the yaks were led away by the old man to the holding stockade and stable for the night. It was best to prevent them from moving about to graze on this very strange night, thought the old man. He moved the eating and water pans of the Mastiffs to the deeper walls of the stable to help localize them for the night with the yaks, mules, ponies and horses.

On arrival from Tsaparang, Yeshe's parents had gone in to Darchen and hired the helper boys and about ten women from the village-settlement. All ten women were elderly in age and some were widows, while the others seemed to have been from very poor families. These boys and women came to live with Yeshe's parents and the great old man at their camping settlement at Dirapuk. The women helped clean up the tenting areas, pick up all the garbage, rake the soil, feed the yaks and mules and would help in odd jobs with the pilgrim groups. Each woman would take up a group of pilgrims by turn as they would come, whether poor ones or rich trekkers.

Yeshe's parents had also taken help from some masons in Darchen, some years ago, to help construct some low bunker-like flat roof stone houses that were more like abutments to rocky areas on these mountain slopes. These stone houses helped to house the foodstuff and other provisions that they packed in to last the entire tourist season. Over the past three years, Yeshe's mother had begun to keep ducks in one of the stone houses to

collect the eggs and sell them. As they traveled back and forth from Tsaparang, they purchased about twenty ducks at Shiquanhe or Darchen, depending upon availability and price. The ducks were packed in wicker baskets and loaded on to the yaks and brought to Dirapuk.

One of the older women helpers brought hot soup and buttered wheat bread to Yeshe. She sat nearby talking to four pilgrim women while Yeshe took a quick break from his work in helping the camping site settle down for the stormy night. He could guess about their conversation. They were not talking about the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain. They were discussing about village girls from their neighbourhoods who could be married off to Yeshe and how to go about getting the permission from the great old man. The older woman helper smiled in the discussion and rushed back to Yeshe to take away the bowl and plates and nudged him knowingly, as though the marriage was already done and over with.

This discussion happened each night and he knew the manner in which he had to respect the affection of the Tibetan pilgrims. He knew it would not happen so easily for these pilgrims were from all over Tibet and each region was entirely different from each other. Yeshe and his family were nomadic horsemen from the Qinhai plains and knew of no other life than moving about in their yak-hair tents. It was only at Dirapuk that they established an elaborate settlement. Back at Tsaparang, they would stay in their yak-hair tents, while this entire settlement, stables, sheds and other equipment would be packed up and left in the custody of one of the woman helper's family at Darchen. Yeshe's parents paid the woman with good money and she would not be tempted

to break their trust. For now, the stormy night that was approaching fast was uppermost in all their thoughts and worries. Yeshe took a good look around the camping site, at the stables and at the tented eatery and shop. Bzanba, the large Tibetan Mastiff, was also looking around, apparently not trusting Yeshe to do his job properly. The dawn would disclose what the night would bring.

II

They sat quietly, amidst the rocks, watching the stream of pilgrims walk by, intent in reaching the Dirapuk Gompa before sunset and darkness would cover the valley beyond Guru Rinpoche. The other pilgrims did not notice them and nobody remarked about this group of walkers of the *kora*. They were about twelve of them together, sitting peacefully, cross-legged, amidst an earlier year's campsite and its leftover rock-circle. A group of pilgrims with their mules and yaks walking by earlier had seen them cooking their lunch and soup. This group of twelve pilgrims had continued to sit at the same spot since noon.

The group seemed to be waiting. Patiently. They were dressed like the other Tibetan pilgrims who came up the *kora* and had nothing to distinguish them otherwise. There seemed to be a holy man amongst them, twirling a prayer drum in his hand, and reciting a singsong hymn in a low voice. He would sing a line of the hymn in rhythm with the prayer drum, and the group of pilgrims would

repeat the line with the same low volume. Nobody could hear the words but could understand the devotion.

Their clothes were dirtying, unwashed from having worn in over many days. Some of them had fur coats, grubby and smelly. They were all dressed for the bitter cold of the region and were very comfortable in sitting it out in the open. They did not speak within the group. The minimal bags that they carried with them had only absolutely basic requirements. Some of the group had windcheaters and jackets picked up from the flea markets at the other cities and villages that they had walked through.

They did not seem *Khampa* pilgrims from east Tibet though they were certainly dressed like them. They had not stopped at the tea stall in the makeshift tent earlier where most other pilgrims took a break without fail. These twelve had come through the resting pilgrims at the tea tent, filled up some bottles of water from the buckets kept outside the tent, and had silently walked away towards the Dirapuk Gumpa. There were other Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims from east Tibet sitting around in smaller groups near the tea tent, and they had watched this group curiously, for they had not exchanged any greetings. The holy man in the group had not even glanced at the other holy men in the various groups of Tibetan Buddhists resting near the tents.

The twelve were now seated at a distance on higher ground from the pilgrim's walking path. The Choku monastery could be seen at a distance. The holy man in the group of twelve had remarked that there did not seem to be anybody at the monastery for the windows were dark and one could not see any light from within. They

had reached this circle of stones from a higher trail that they had walked on, from the Grachom Ngagye Dorsa. Not many pilgrims preferred to take this trail for it was rumoured to be inauspicious and inhabited by the demons and evil spirits who did not dare to harass the pilgrims on the *kora*.

The Grachom Ngagye Dorsa, near Sershong Tharchen is one of the few sky-burial places permitted near the *Kang Renpoche*. It was said to exist for more than thousands of years at the place. The group of twelve pilgrims did not pay any respects at the burial place but merely walked through silently, at a steady pace, choosing the higher trail towards Choku. They were now seated after an hour's slow walk from the monastery. It would be dark in an hour or earlier if the storm clouds came up faster in this valley. The slow moving water streams would pick up speed and could block the walking trail later. It would become dangerous to walk in the darkness with only the faint light that may be visible from the pilgrim tents on the higher slopes towards Choku. Usually the windows of the Choku monastery were lighted up to help the pilgrims.

It was not so at the Choku monastery. The monks were yet to light up the windows and had come to do so. One of the monks had spotted the group of twelve pilgrims sitting at the circle of stones on the higher trail from Choku towards Dirapuk. A rainstorm was sure to come pouring down the pilgrim's path, and it could be a hailstorm tonight. Most pilgrims were walking by at a rapid pace. Some groups had come up to the monastery and had taken up refuge in the shelters outside. Some pilgrim groups had set up their tents much earlier during the day, fearing the worst. It was therefore a very curious

sight to see a group of pilgrims sitting in an open spot, almost seeming to await the rain.

The young monk called for the other two monks to join him at the window and pointed out the group of twelve pilgrims seated out in the open. A younger monk suggested that they should send out one of the Tibetan guides on a mule to go and enquire if the group was in trouble and if they needed help. The senior monk gestured in the negative and kept watching the pilgrims. On an impulse, the senior monk called out to an old Tibetan guide who usually lived near the Choku monastery during the pilgrim season. This old guide, now in his eighties, but very hyper and spirited eighties, came up in a brisk walk to the window, crossing the monastery hall.

The senior monk pointed out the group of twelve pilgrims sitting out in the open to the old Tibetan guide. The old man looked intently at the group and nodded sadly. The other two monks looked on in puzzlement. The youngest one asked, “O Master, what is it that makes you seem so sad? Do you know of that group of foolish pilgrims? Are they going to sit in the rain through the night? Is it their foolishness that makes you sad?”

The senior monk did not answer. Instead, he spoke to the old Tibetan guide, “Dawa, my friend, when was it that we saw such an event earlier? Was it not at the very spot?” The old man nodded, and looked out at the group, intently once again, kept watching for a long time, and replied, “Yes, Master Rinchen. It was so. This seems to happen once in three to five years. It has happened about three times in your time here at Choku.” The senior

monk, Master Rinchen, spoke in agreement, “Yes. I have seen it happen three times earlier. It’s usually after a period of three or five years. I wonder how do they decide that it is to be this year, and that it is this time of the year, and that they should select the very same spot.”

The young monks were more puzzled than before. The Master, knowing their unspoken questions about the group of pilgrims, said, “My brothers, this is a very unusual happening. You are seeing it for the first time. Who do you think they are? Can you guess and tell me what is mean to happen today?” The young monk looked out at the group again, and replied, “Master, from their dress and appearance, they seem to be Buddhist *Khampa* pilgrims from east Tibet. They must be resting or praying together, wanting to witness the gathering of the rain clouds on the great mountain’s peaks. They will probably run in later or set up a tent at that place.”

It was the old Tibetan guide, Dawa, who answered with a sad smile, “No. No. They are not *Khampa* at all. We have searched the place earlier. They are from someplace else. They are definitely not Tibetan but they go to extreme trouble to dress up like the local Buddhist pilgrims from towards Lhasa. We do not know where they are from. Each time they have appeared, I have spent much time at the circle of stones and in the nearby trails, searching for some sign about them. We do not know where they come from. They sit out through the night at the place and it is usually through a stormy night such as the one that is to come. They know and select the night and come to this spot. In the morning, they are gone. They are never known to go back to Darchen or go forward to Dirapuk. They are not seen on the other trails. They just disappear in the morning. Nobody has seen

them in the daytime in any of the local trails, towns or villages.”

“We enquired in the nearby villages. We spoke to the other pilgrim guides, policemen and other pilgrim groups. We asked at the monasteries and other guesthouses along the roads going away from Darchen towards Lhasa. There was no news,” said the elder monk, “It seemed like they had disappeared. We regularly have news of people who try to climb the *Kang Renpoche*, and they are from all sorts of communities. But, usually, we know about it in advance, and the police outposts get to know from all pilgrim guides and eatery owners from the gossip that they pick up. These adventurers are warned away from climbing the mountain. They are allowed to do the *kora* and complete their pilgrimage. This is not a tourist destination. Most visitors, who come here, come out of devotion. It is the utmost and ultimate pilgrimage destination. But it is this group that seems to come once in three to five years that is a puzzle. They just disappear from the trail.”

They watched the approaching rainstorm, seated patiently, humming the prayer hymns, led by their holy man. The twelve pilgrims continued to sit inside the circle of stones, watching the dusk taking over the landscape. The last of the pilgrims rushed towards to Dirapuk Gompa and could be seen scampering over the stony landscape, hoping to obtain some safe shelter for

the night. The pilgrim trail was totally deserted now. One could hear and smell the rain at a distance, and the low evening winds brought with them the threat of the night. The twelve pilgrims did not move from their seated circle. They sat out in the open and did not make any attempt to prepare a tent or a temporary shelter.

The youngest monk, Brother Tamang, at the Choku monastery could not get away from the window. The senior Master had not allowed them to light up the windows. The young monk kept watching the group of twelve pilgrims seated on the higher trail. They had not lit up any lamps and seemed to sit by patiently, waiting for the darkness that was fast approaching. If he had not known that they were seated at that spot, the young monk could not have spotted them, even if he were to search for them. He could just make out the huddle of heads, with their fur caps, in a small group, in silhouette against the shimmer of the early drizzle of rain that had begun to strike the slopes between Choku and Dirapuk. The group of twelve pilgrims just sat there, without moving.

The old Tibetan guide, Dawa, sat near the window, with the senior Master. They had lighted two candles near a small statue of Buddha and were praying. The other young monk had lighted two candles near the other small statue of Buddha at the other end of the prayer hall. He was praying quietly. Dawa sat up straight and chatted with the senior Master, “We are the privileged, though we are by ourselves. You have the sacred duty, day after day, night after night, to worship the most enlightened one, in the form of the Buddha statue from Garsha. We are truly blessed.”

The three monks bowed in prayer at this statement by Dawa, in his reference to the Buddha statues from Garsha. Master Rinchen, the senior monk, nodded and said, “O Dawa, my old friend, you are correct. We are truly blessed. But yet, it is an incomplete blessing. If only we know of the other three statues, it would have been a complete blessing. There were five statues of Garsha. We have only one here. It is said that there is another one, in Garsha. Three statues have been lost and nothing is known of their whereabouts. The statue that my brother monk prays to is the only one left in Choku.”

The youngest monk, Brother Tamang, knew of the story of the Buddha statues from Garsha. After all, he was himself from the Tibetan villages near Nyalam, on the border with Nepal. Some temples dedicated to the Buddha in these villages were also dedicated to the stories of the Amitabha Buddha and the stories of the Buddha from Garsha. It was said that the five statues had been found in a lake of milk at Garsha, south of Nyalam and Nepal and also south of Sikkim. The monks at Garsha had brought them out to Bhutan some years ago when the monastery at Choku was under the threat of destruction. The monastery was rebuilt about twenty-five years ago, and one of the statues of the Buddha from Garsha was brought back to Choku.

Brother Tamang kept watching the spot where he knew the twelve pilgrims were seated out in the open. He wondered what they had planned to do or what were they expecting to happen in a stormy night. Dawa looked at Brother Tamang, and said, “Brother, its no use. We simply do not know what happens out there. They sit it out on a stormy night. They are never seen in the entire region before the stormy night is predicted. The moment

we know that such a non-seasonal heavy hailstorm is to come, this group makes its appearance on the pilgrim trail. And, in the morning, they are gone. Without a clue and without any explanation that we can understand.”

“There has to be some explanation. There has to be some reason. It cannot happen each time without any logic. We are missing something. We have to do something. What can it be? It must have been planned to happen in this manner. Its happening right out there in front of us,” said Brother Tamang in exasperation, watching the pilgrims out in the trail.

It had started raining heavily. The dusk had come and gone. The twelve pilgrims continued to sit it out at the circle of stones. Quietly, they had pulled out black-coloured plastic sheets from their bags, and covered themselves. In an instant, their silhouette had changed. The fur hats were no longer visible and the twelve could not be seen as separate individuals. The black plastic sheets covering them made them look like the rest of the circle of stones that they sat within. The humming of the prayer hymn could not be heard unless one stood within the group, and their holy man was continuing to spin the prayer drum in his hand.

There was no other conversation amongst them. They sat huddled next to each other, not seeming to get affected by the chill and the cold winds that moved about with the rain. The skies lighted up occasionally with lightning hitting the high peaks. *Kang Renpoche* seemed to light up that much brighter in the rain. The circle of stones had been set up around heavily packed and beaten down clayey earth. The pilgrims had laid down heavy plastic sheets on the ground before they sat for the night. It

seemed like the twelve pilgrims were used to this sharp winter-like winds and heavy monsoon. Not a single individual amongst them had sneezed or sniffled or coughed.

Up at the Choku Monastery, the young monk, Brother Tamang, had guessed that the twelve pilgrims must have covered themselves with plastic sheets to sit it out through the night in the rainstorm. He looked around the dimly lit prayer hall in the monastery. The marble statue of Amitabha Buddha stood serenely near the pair of elephant tusks. The light of the candles kept playing with the shadows of the prayer hall and seemed to cause the statue of Amitabha Buddha to talk to Brother Tamang. He kept looking devoutly at the statue, and looking back at the spot where the twelve pilgrims would be sitting out in the open.

Brother Tamang came to a decision. He said, “Master, you are my teacher, and you speak for the elders in our order. The three of us have been staying at our monastery for the past few years. We have been taught to be truthful in our path. It is in the knowledge of the unknown that we seek our goals. Master, you have said that this has happened at least three times during the period of your stay at our monastery here. In all these three times, we do not know what is happening in front of our windows. This is our holy ground, and the *Kang Renpoche* is the abode of our gods.”

Master Rinchen feared what was to come, for he could understand the glint and sharpness of Brother Tamang’s eyes. He had seen him looking at the statue of Amitabha Buddha, and had guessed that the young monk had sought resolve. The Master replied, “My young brother,

I know you from when you had come to our temple for your initiation. I know your dedication and I can understand you even before you can understand yourself. Pray tell, what is it that you wish to?"

The young monk bowed in gratitude, and said, "Yes, O Master. You do understand me well. We have a situation here, near our monastery that we do not know anything about. And we have left our houses and families to join our temple in search of that knowledge that is difficult to understand and that knowledge which is essential to understand. The Most Enlightened One had taught us over these many hundreds of years that it is he who is the emperor who knows that he has no empire, but is on the path to knowledge, and is always seeking it. We have a riddle here, right outside the windows of our monastery, and we do not try to seek an explanation."

Master Rinchen and Dawa nodded in agreement at the wisdom of the younger monk. They could understand the clarity that he must have received from the magic of the guardian of the Choku monastery. Brother Tamang continued, "We should go out there in the rain. We should not be frightened of the rainstorm. We are used to the rain, the cold, the winds and the trails near our monastery. The group sitting out there does not know what we know. They do not know that we have been watching them and that we have observed them on the earlier occasions. They do not know that we know the higher and lower trail and that we are very familiar with the slopes near our monastery. We can walk about in this region in utter darkness. And what do we have to fear? We should go out there and try to find out what happens in this rainstorm and in the darkness of the night. Why do these pilgrims disappear on such a night? Master Naropa will protect us."

Master Rinchen did not much like the idea of interrupting the flow of life, the sequence of events, known and unknown, logical and mysterious, strange and familiar or the godly or ungodly nature of developments that always seemed to happen around the *Kang Renpoche*. These sorts of events were meant to happen, he felt. He spoke in a low voice to the young monk, “Brother, I understand your quest for knowledge. But this is the wonderful and unknown world of the great mountain where the Most Enlightened One arrived with thousands of arahats and yet declared that there was much to know and understand about this place. It is not for us to disturb the way of events in this world. We cannot seek knowledge by participating in it.”

“There are numerous caves in this magical Lhachu valley in the shadow of the *Kang Renpoche* that holds many siddhas, saints, holy spirits, demons or dakinis. We do not know who is who. They seek their own goals and they do not enquire into the lives or questions of any other. They have been here for several years. It is said that some have been here for more than a hundred years,” said the Master, and continued, “Who are we to dispute what is said about these beings and souls and spirits in these mountains of the Lhachu valley? We stay here under the protection of the holy presence of the manifestation of the Dharmakaya Amitabha Buddha. Nobody disturbs us. It is in our responsibility to avoid disturbing the way of life and the manner of events that abound in this valley.”

Brother Tameng bowed in respect. He could understand the need to restrain one's impulses in this land of the holiest among all religions. Who knew what particular ritual were those pilgrims here to undertake? They would perhaps be of another religion. He would be wrong to have gone and disturbed them. But what if there was to be sacrilege of the holy mountain and the sacred valley? Should he keep his patience and restrain himself? What if they were terrorists? Should he keep quiet? This was a strange and violent world nowadays. It could also be the Han Chinese, camping here to spy on the *kora* or to cause an unpleasant event that would bring a bad name to the monasteries in the Lhachu valley.

No. It was not to be. He would have to request the Master's permission to disobey him. He looked once again out to the high trail, out in the valley. The rains were getting to be heavier, and one could hear the thunder, rolling out slowly at a far distance. At times, shards of lightning brightened up the skies far into the mountains. Try as he could, he was not able to spot the circle of stones or the pilgrims. The wind was getting much colder and it would be absolutely death to anyone who would wander out amongst the stones and the streams in this night. The waters would be freezing faster than it could flow on the ground, and it would be extremely slippery.

The young monk spoke out, "Master, forgive me, for it is in your knowledge about me that you would be aware of my desire to be absolutely sure in finding out the truth. We need to know. It may be of another's religion and it may be a ritual that we should not disturb. But, what is it that is different from each other in this valley. We are all seekers of the same truth here, in the shadow of the *Kang Renpoché*, waiting the turn of events as they

happen. The hundreds of pilgrims who come here, do so in their faith in our presence and that we would not allow the passing of time to change this place and destroy their opportunity to offer their prayers. What if these pilgrims sitting out there in the rain, are wrong, or bad, or evil or demonic? We need to know.”

Master Rinchen nodded in agreement, and replied, “I have to agree with you, young one. You are of the new generation, and it is your world that you take care. I am only a custodian to allow you to take control of your inheritance. I cannot deny you the knowledge. But let there be another way to do this. You take my old friend, Dawa, with you. I cannot allow you to do this alone. I know that the two of you know these slopes and can make your way to the circle of stones in this dark night. We will light up these windows after a while, to allow you to seek your direction to return safely. Go safely, and go quietly. We do not know what is happening out there. I have not been able to seek the answers in the years that I have been here, and it has already happened thrice. These are the three occasions that we saw. Who knows how many times it has happened otherwise?”

Dawa brightened up at this opportunity to go out in the rain and seek answers to what was to happen out there in the night. He had missed out on the previous three occasions and wondered if he was to carry this ignorance to his grave. This was his world out there. The unknown was not to happen in the known world of the *kora* and in this valley. He was the owner of the *kora*, he felt. He was one of the oldest guides on the pilgrim trail. His father had done the same, and so had his grand father. Not a single man in his family had ever owned any property. They had lived their lives in makeshift huts, tents, and sheds or eked it out in the monasteries. Their

women had worked in the guesthouses, monasteries and eateries. The trail was his world.

They got ready to go out in the rainstorm. The old pilgrim guide picked up black coloured nylon rainproof jackets and track pants. The young monk draped a black coloured nylon coat over his robes. They left the monastery building and stood in the compound, to get a feel for the rain pouring heavily onto the cobbled grounds. From the high walled compound, they climbed down the stairs and began to get comfortable with the night. It was not a strange outing for them. The two of them were used to wandering off in the night together to seek a good spot to sit and watch the *Kang Renpoche*. Those outings had taken place on clear nights or full moon nights. They had walked out in drizzles and had occasionally got caught in sudden cloudbursts. They knew their way around these slopes.

Leaving the monastery's stairs, they walked up the slope along the shadow of the monastery, on the other side of the Dirapuk path. They climbed to a higher trail that they knew of on the slopes facing the Lhachu valley. It felt safer to be on higher ground and to be walking a trail that they were familiar with. Upon reaching the path, they began walking steadily towards the circle of stones. They knew that the path permitted them to avoid being detected. There were some boulders and stones that had fallen this year and it would allow them to reach a safe spot above the location of the pilgrims seated out there in the rain. Perhaps they could stay back on the higher trail and keep a quiet watch over what was to happen, if it had not already occurred.

It took them about thirty minutes to reach thereabouts. It felt right, thought Dawa that they were almost above the

circle of stones. He pulled at the young monk's robe to stop him. They sat down amongst the stones there, to get their eyes to make out the boulders and the slopes downward to the other trail. It took some time but they could only barely make out the nearest stones. Dawa kept examining each stone pile in detail, trying to rule out those that could not be the ones that they were seeking. Brother Tameng, on his part, was working on a different strategy. He thought he knew the location. He had been intently searching out landmarks at these slopes from when he had been standing at the window of the monastery. There was an old stone stupa that had two prayer flags from the previous years. He had measured that the circle of stones was in direct line from the stone stupa to the hill stream that flowed near the lower trail.

They walked down carefully to the stone stupa, with the rain drowning out any noise that would have been otherwise very loud and disturbing in this serene valley on another night. There was a low wall around the stupa, and they made themselves comfortable next to the stone structure, on the other side of the heavy rain pouring down upon them. There was some respite here, and they sat together, silently, waiting and watching. Dawa pointed out suddenly, and they could now make out, about a hundred footfalls away, the circle of stones could be barely seen. There was a huddle of stone-like shapes inside the circle, too close to each other, unlike the other stones on the slopes. These would be the pilgrims, thought Brother Tameng, huddled under plastic sheets.

Dawa grabbed Brother Tameng's arm and gestured in awe towards the lower slopes. They watched in silence and amazement. The skies parted above, in a flash of lightning, and they could see clearly for a brief instant.

They had never seen anything like it before. It was a yak herd, walking slowly, in a small bunch, moving ahead purposefully. There was no sound and they did not seem like any yak from the valley. These were large animals, with very low hanging hair. Their heads were held high, watching ahead, unlike what the other domestic yak would have done in such heavy rain. There must have been more than ten yaks, Dawa thought. These animals were walking in this heavy rain, and walking steadily and silently, as if on purpose, to some destination.

Dawa and Brother Tameng watched in wonder at the sight of the yaks walking down the lower trail from the direction of the Dirapuk monastery in the heavy rain. They could spot them only when the lightning in the upper mountains cast some light into the Lhachu valley. The herd walked tightly together, in a close bunch. Each individual in the herd seemed to be of the same age and of equal size. They knew their way and kept walking confidently.

Dawa whispered, "Let us not disturb our attention from the circle of stones. Keep your eyes at the pilgrims who are sitting it out in the rain. Those are wild yak and they are probably walking away from all the pilgrims and disturbance at Dirapuk and Dolma La pass. They must have been blocked and they are trying to get out of the

valley and on to higher ground. Do not look away from the circle of stones.”

Brother Tameng nodded in the dark night, and tapped Dawa’s hands, knowing that they could not see each other. He kept watching the pilgrims, and on occasions when he could watch their silhouette, he knew that they continued to sit there. Had they seen the herd of wild yaks approaching them? Did they know about them? Were they connected? In this place, under the shadow of the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain, Brother Tameng felt, anything could happen. He kept moving his line of sight from the pilgrims to the herd of wild yak.

They were certainly larger than the domestic yak that he was familiar with, thought Brother Tameng. These were larger, much larger. The span of their horns was also wider, indeed, much wider, larger and heavier. It was amazing that the herd could walk so tightly together, in such a dark night, in a rainstorm and yet not have the horns get entangled with each other. Realising that he was getting distracted, Brother Tameng turned again to watch the circle of stones. He could see the huddle below the plastic sheets. Did the pilgrims sitting out there know about the wild yak herd that was walking towards them in the lower trail?

Dawa whispered again, “Brother, you watch the pilgrims and the area around the circle of stones. Be careful. Anything can happen at any time. I will keep watching the wild yak herd and the areas away from the circle of stones.” Brother Tameng tapped Dawa’s hand in agreement. The rain was getting heavier and more intense. The thunder had started in the valleys nearby, and the lightning was brighter in the Lhachu valley. The

sound of the thunder in each valley seemed to echo against the other valleys, and seemed like the roars would never stop.

The wild yak herd moved across a rain-laden fast flowing stream that crossed the lower trail. The waters were rising, and the yaks walked through the fast stream without stopping. Their speed seemed slow, but Dawa knew that the perspective in this dark stormy night could be extremely deceptive. The wild yak herds were known to move rapidly on steep slopes and charge through the cold plains. The domestic yak stayed away from them and so did the sheep and goat herders. The Changpa nomads had many stories of wild yak herds in the high mountains. After each narration, the stories only got wilder and fascinating.

Dawa wondered about this herd. This was unlike any wild yak herd that he had seen in all his years in the valleys around the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain. This herd seemed larger than the largest wild bull that he had seen five years ago on the banks of the hill stream river near the Drolma La pass. That bull had been larger than most other yak bulls that he had seen elsewhere. He had been able to estimate the height of that large bull because it had moved against an old stone stupa, and there had been a prayer cloth hanging over the higher parts. It had been useful as a marker and Dawa had been able to understand that the bull was about 7 ½ feet tall.

This wild yak herd that was moving down the lower trail was uniquely different from other yak herds that he had known. All individuals in this herd seemed equal in size, and he sensed that each individual was a massive bull, and each could be about more than eight feet in height. It

was not so much about the height. Dawa felt that the bulls seemed to be much larger than other wild yaks. They seemed to be really huge. More than 1.5 tonnes in weight, he thought. This could not be so much as real, he wondered. Was it really happening?

He knew that the wild yaks did not mind the rain, but could they really withstand this intense rainstorm? He looked at the circle of stones, and could make out the pilgrims sitting under the plastic sheets. What was happening? How would this night move? What would the pilgrims do? Had the wild yak herd come down this trail on earlier occasions also? He wished that he had had the courage and presence of mind and initiative to come out in the rainstorm at night and had tried to find out what was happening. He felt grateful to Brother Tameng for his courage.

The wild yak herd was almost near the circle of stones. They were walking on the lower trail from Dirapuk towards Choku. The pilgrims were sitting at their spot on the middle trail. Brother Tameng and Dawa were hiding behind the low wall at the dilapidated stone stupa on the higher trail. The rainstorm was beginning to show a slight drizzle of hail. They were small hailstones and not dangerous. The hailstorm could change suddenly and gather in strength and pour larger hailstones. Brother Tameng and Dawa had a clear view, if it could be called that in this stormy night, whenever the lightning hit the higher mountains.

There was some movement in the circle of stones, they realized. The twelve pilgrims had moved about in the spot. The plastic sheets seemed to have been opened up and rearranged. Perhaps the pilgrims had spotted the

wild yak herd. Dawa wondered if the pilgrims would get away from the circle of stones and move up into the higher trails to get away from the animals.

The animals came to a halt below the circle of stones. They were tightly bunched, and stood magnificently in the rainstorm. A strange change took over in the Lhachu Valley in the area around the circle of stones. The rain seemed to have stopped here. Dawa and Brother Tameng could see the rain at Dirapuk, at Tarboche and on the higher slopes of *Kang Renpoche* and other mountains on the other side of the Lhachu Valley. The clouds cleared over Choku and the moon came out from the high slopes. The valley was bathed in brilliant moonlight and one could see the herd of wild yaks and the circle of stones.

The wild yaks grouped around, turning about, and were now facing the circle of stones. They continued to be bunched very tightly. The animals began to walk up the lower hill slope towards the circle of stones. What was happening, wondered Dawa. He could sense Brother Tameng's excitement. The yaks walked right to the circle of stones and stood there silently. The twelve pilgrims removed their plastic sheets and continued to sit at the same spot. They seemed to be humming some sort of a prayer hymn. Dawa could see that one among the pilgrims was a holy man, and he had a prayer drum that was being turned about.

Brother Tameng nudged Dawa silently, and pointed with his finger at the lower slope. At the spot where the herd of wild yaks had turned and walked up to the circle of stones, there now stood a pack of wolves, scattered and silent, watching. Dawa counted twelve wolves that were

on sight. They had not seen them earlier. It could have been due to the rain and the dark stormy night. Had the wolves come with the wild yak herd? They could have missed seeing them earlier. Or, the wolves could have been waiting in the region for the twelve pilgrims to move. They may have been waiting their time. After all, the wolves were not known to walk with wild yaks. They were known to be their occasional and rare predators. The wild yak had only the wolf to fear on rare occasions.

The pilgrims sat quietly at the circle of stones, watching the wild yak standing on the slopes. They continued with their humming. The pilgrims did not seem disturbed and did not seem to realize that they were watching a strange happening. Or, did they actually expect it to happen? The wolves stood silently at the hill stream on the lower trail. There was no sound in the area, and strangely, the wild yaks were not even grunting. Dawa and Brother Tameng could see the smoke coming out of the yaks' nostrils. Their tails were upright. They were indeed tall and really large. And then, the night changed yet again. The moon went behind the high mountains. The rain clouds returned. The rainstorm started pouring down the Choku area. It was dark again.

They waited through the night, sitting it out in the hailstorm behind the low wall of the stone stupa below the Choku monastery. The rain did not let go. It continued to rain steadily. There was no thunder and there was no lightning. The rainwaters did not fall down from the skies. It looked like there was a great wall of water standing between the Lhachu valley and the skies above the *Kang Renpoche*. The roar of the storm was tremendous. The wall of water did not break down and the hailstorm began to gather in large hailstones.

Dawa and Brother Tameng could not dare to run for the monastery. Not after what they had just seen out on the trail. Had they really seen wild yaks, wolves, pilgrims who did not fear the rain? What else could happen on this night? Dawa did not want to contribute to any disaster or personal damage by being foolish by running out in the hailstorm. Brother Tameng was too awestruck by the magic of the events that he had just witnessed. What could they understand from what had happened here?

It was totally dark out on the trail. The hailstorm was pelting down on them. They were able to just about hide below an abutment on the stone stupa that barely gave them some protection. There was no wind, thunder or lightning. There was just the sound of hailstones crashing on the hill slopes. They broke upon hitting the low wall around the stupa and the broken pieces and shards were hitting them from all sides. The rain clothes and robe were their only protection. After a while, Dawa and Brother Tameng began to pile up stones and rocks around them to build up a small wall to block the hailstone pieces flying about.

Dawa wondered about what was happening out on the trail. Were the wild yaks standing out there at the circle of stones? What made the wolves come out near the pilgrims? Had the wolves followed the wild yaks? Where had the yaks come from? He had not heard of any news or gossip about such a strange herd of extremely large yak bulls moving about together. Usually yak bulls moved about alone. They were known to prefer grassy outer slopes on the lower hills. Sometimes they were known to have stayed around the banks of the lakes around the hills. He had not seen bulls of such a magnificent height and body volume. They were large, extremely large. Their horns had made them seem much larger.

What were the pilgrims doing at the circle of stones? There was no protection out there. How would they survive the hailstorm? Had they seen the wolves on the lower trail, behind and beyond the wild yak herd? There were so many questions, thought Brother Tameng. Instead of finding answers, they had only discovered more questions. He wanted to discuss everything that they had seen, and he simply did not have the strength to talk.

They never knew that the dawn had come and gone by, and that the day had begun. The rain had not ceased, and the dark storm clouds had continued to cover the pilgrim trail on the Lhachu valley. The first sign of the day came when the clouds began to lighten up, and as suddenly as it had begun, the hailstorm stopped. The day came out of the clouds and the sun shone down on the trail. Dawa and Brother Tameng peered down from the stone stupa at the circle of stones. As he had feared, Dawa could not see anyone. The wild yak herd had gone, and the wolves

were not to be seen. The circle of stones was empty. The pilgrims who had sat at the spot had disappeared.

They waited a while at the stupa and looked up at the Choku monastery. They could see Master Rinchen and the younger monk looking at them from the windows. They were waving at them. Dawa and Brother Tameng waved back and stepped out of the low wall around the stupa. They walked down to the circle of stones. There was nothing out at the spot. There was no sign that a group of men had sat down at the place. The plastic sheets had gone. The pilgrims had gone with their bags and other belongings. Dawa ran out to the lower slopes, searching for signs and tracks of the wild yak herd. Brother Tameng continued to search for any sign of disturbance or presence of the pilgrims inside the circle of stones. There was no sign. There were no tracks. The stones were not disturbed. Nothing seemed out of place.

They went down to the river stream that was flowing by with more and more water rushing down from all around. Master Rinchen could be seen watching them from the high windows of the monastery. Dawa searched for tracks of the wolves. It was not possible that there could be tracks of any kind. Not after the strength of the hailstorm that they had waited through the night. Any sign or track would have been wiped away. They climbed back to the circle of stones and searched up and down the trail. There was no sign of any movement right from the faint view of Dirapuk and all the way down to the turn of the trail to Tarboche.

Dawa went up to the exact spots where they had seen the herd come and stop outside the circle of stones. He was searching for signs of yak hair. Domestic yak would

always leave obvious signs that they had moved through a place or if they had rested at any location. Yak had different types of hair, and it was the matted shaggy coat that always left signs of its presence. He could not find any trace. Where would they have gone? How did the pilgrims move away so fast, right out in the open, within the fierce hailstorm?

Brother Tameng looked up in wonderment at the higher slopes of the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain. Would the answers to this puzzle be hidden in the sacred mountain? What had really happened out here in this stormy night? He had received resolve yesterday, at night, when he had sought courage from the statue of the Dharmakaya Amitabha Buddha in the prayer hall of the Choku monastery. He had known that this region had more unknowns than any other region in the highlands of Tibet. The numerous stories were not even understood properly. Most were passed on, person to person, community to community, temple to temple, religion to religion and had yet to even begin to know exactly the number of stories of merely the Lachu valley.

Dawa shook his head in wonderment and called out to Brother Tameng, “Let us go back to the monastery and look out at the slopes from the terraces of our buildings. We cannot get anything from this location. The rain and hailstorm has washed away all signs and tracks. The pilgrims have disappeared. What had happened three years ago, and before, and before, has happened again.” Except, he thought to himself, this time, the mystery began to get more complex. How could one explain the wild yaks and wolves? And why did the pilgrims not get frightened?

They returned to the monastery. Brother Tameng went straight to the statue of the Dharmakaya Amitabha Buddha and stood before it, lost in his prayer and thoughts. Dawa stood with the Master Rinchen at the window, watching the circle of stones. The Master said, "Peace be with the two of you, my old friend. We had not moved away from the windows through the night. At one moment, when the rains had stopped, I could see the herd of wild yaks, standing near the circle of stones. I was also able to see the wolves standing out there on the lower trail and near the river streams. I saw that the pilgrims stood their ground, unafraid, and courageous. I never saw what happened after that. The rains and the hailstorm did not allow us to peer inside the water curtain that stood out there in the valley."

Dawa replied, "O Master, I am happy. I was wondering if I had not imagined the entire night. I know that Brother Tameng was also with me, but I was frightened for him also. I am happy that you saw what we saw. What we did see is what we know. I am puzzled by what we saw and what we are unable to accept. Is that why we do not understand? We saw twelve pilgrims who sat out there in the rain, and waited for the storm to come. They knew that it was to rain on the trail. They waited for it. They sat together and did not move, even when it was very cold and the downpour became heavier. It did not affect them. Master, did they know that the cold and the rainstorm would not affect them? They were not like us at all."

Master Rinchen nodded, and said, "Yes, my friend. We are in a puzzle about it because we think that the pilgrims were also people like us. They stood with courage, when the wild yak walked up to the circle of

stones. We would have run away from the spot right when we would have spotted the yaks walking down the trail. These pilgrims did not walk away. They stood there and looked at the wild yaks without fear. They knew that they would not be harmed. They are not like us. How did they know that they could sit out there? Who were they? Where did they come from?"

III

Below the Dirapuk Gompa, within the circle of makeshift tents and sheds, one could see the effect of the rainstorm that had swept the night. Some sheds had broken up, and some tents had fallen. The rocks had protected them. The hailstorm had not been as severe at Dirapuk as it had been near the Choku monastery. Norbu peered outside his tent and watched the sun claim the valley. Pilgrims and animals were yet to get out of their shelters. One and all, they were all awestruck by the force of the rainstorm.

Norbu said a silent prayer, and wondered if the rain had hit Shiquanhe or Darchen with the same force. He prayed for his parents, his sister and their shop and their animals. His yaks and the Mastiff had survived the night in the tent. He looked out at the empty valley. Nobody was moving. He came out of his tent and watched the trail from the pass to Tarboche, north to Choku, and northwards of Dirapuk to Drolma La Pass. The upper

slopes on the *Kang Renpoche* were shining like a newly washed photograph in the sun. The rain clouds had gone. The snowy peak was beautiful, he thought.

He wondered about his parents at Darchen at their store. Nearly a hundred pilgrims or more would have sheltered in those sheds, and the yak herd would have been moved to a safe sheltered area. Norbu thought back to his native hamlet and hoped that the rainstorm had not destroyed the village. His family would not have any home to go back to. He wanted to return and purchase large farm plots and go in for vegetable farming. Not barley, he had decided. Barley farming was a total loss and under the mercy of the rain, the sun, the clouds, the weeds and the insects. He would go in for growing vegetables.

Norbu had seen the future. He had seen the demand for vegetables and food items on the pilgrim trails. These groups were ready to pay four to five times more than what his family would get selling vegetables in the local market. His parents could continue to manage the store at Darchen and he would raise money by taking the pilgrims on the *kora* and save enough money to go and buy large farm plots. These pilgrims were intelligent. Sometimes they talked to him and asked about him, his parents and his native village. Some pilgrims spoke to him about the world outside of Tibet. Some Han Chinese policemen spoke to him about the craze of growing vegetables inside cloth sheds. It protected the crop from clouds, rain, hail, chill and the sun.

He looked back inside the tent at his two yaks sitting peacefully. They knew that their resting time was precious. For once they would be up and about, they would be laden with luggage and goods and they would

have to keep walking through the day. The luggage would not be taken off their backs even during lunch hours or when the pilgrims rested during the day. The Mastiff seemed very quiet, subdued and very different today. Norbu began to pull down the tent and started packing it up. He rolled the tent around the poles and tied it up with the fastening ropes. He had one yak for the tents and his own kit, while the other yak carried the backpacks and foodstuffs of the touring pilgrims.

The yaks watched him quietly. The same activity was going on at the other tents. Some yaks had gotten up and were moving around. The pilgrims had come out of their tents and instantly began taking photographs of the *Kang Renpoche* and everything that was happening at Dirapuk. The pilgrim guide came up to Norbu and the yak boys and handed them their breakfast kits of oatmeal, noodles, meat strips and potatoes. A good breakfast would be required after such a night. The pilgrim guide hugged Norbu in relief, at seeing him safe, and said, “We will wait here through the morning. We do not know what would be happening at the Drolma La Pass. The rains would be coming down the hill streams now, and there could be a flash flood anywhere. Let us wait and watch what happens. We could move at noon, if there is news from the Pass.”

Norbu nodded in agreement. It was better to be safe than to be caught in the sudden floods that would occur after such a cloudburst. He called out to another yak boy and got him to start cooking breakfast for all the helper boys and local porters. One of the monks had come out of Dirapuk Gompa and was walking around looking to see if everyone was safe. The yak boys and the porters bowed low in respect when the monk approached them.

He came up to Norbu's Mastiff and patted him on his head and waited for the dog to growl or snarl. The Mastiff did neither and merely whimpered.

The monk asked Norbu, "What's wrong with this guy? I thought Mastiffs were more dangerous. Did he get frightened by the yaks in the tent, or by the rain, or by your cooking?" He pointed out to the hole that Norbu had dug inside the tent. The doused fire was still warm, having been fed yak dung cakes through the night. The yak boys laughed politely and one of the porters came up to the monk to seek blessings. They whispered to each other and walked away. Norbu looked at the Mastiff and wondered. What was wrong?

"Look!" shouted one of the yak boys, pointing towards the Choku monastery. The porter and the monk also looked at the direction and returned to where Norbu stood. They could see a monk from the Choku monastery and a old pilgrim guide walking towards Dirapuk. This was very rare, for a monk to walk from one monastery to another on a normal day, unless there was a festive occasion or there had been a disaster. Had something terrible occurred at the monastery? Norbu shivered, and prayed, looking up at *Kang Renpoche*. The Dirapuk monk also prayed silently.

The pilgrims had not noticed anything amiss. They did not know that it was unusual. They thought it was a regular happening. They started taking photographs of the monk from Choku and the old man accompanying him. Norbu and the Dirapuk monk started walking towards the lower trail to meet with the monk from Choku. Nobody followed them. The Dirapuk monk bowed and said, "Welcome, Brother. Before you say

anything, I trust and pray to the Most Enlightened One that everyone is safe at the Choku monastery? I hope there has been no disaster.”

The old man replied, “Master, there has been no problem. I have with me, Brother Tameng, from the Choku Monastery. I am Dawa, and I am a pilgrim guide. I do not go around the entire *kora* nowadays, but escort the groups who come to Darchen and want to visit Choku especially to seek the blessings of the Dharmakaya Amitabha Buddha. We come in enquiry, for we wish to know about certain questions from events that happened in the night that went by in the rainstorm.”

The monk from Dirapuk answered, “Brother Tameng, welcome. You are also welcome, Old Man Dawa, for I know you well, from many years. This is Norbu, from Darchen and beyond. He takes the pilgrims on the *kora*. The yak boys are preparing some breakfast, and you can share some hot soup so that you can rest and speak. You look like you need some rest, and that you have been denied it throughout the night. Were you out in the open in the rain?”

Brother Tameng asked, for he was impatient, “I must ask the questions, my brother. I will also accept the soup with much gratitude, for we do need it. But let us sit here, so that we do not frighten those who should not be. Some strange events happened out near Choku during the night. We have come to enquire about it, for the beings that created the events, whether they were humans, animals, spirits or demons, we know not who, some of those beings walked down the trail from Dirapuk towards Choku. I want to know if the yak boys noticed anything wrong at night with the yaks or the

dogs. Did the yaks get disturbed, and did the dogs bark or get frightened?"

Norbu shivered again. So did the monk from Dirapuk. They remembered their discussion about the strange behaviour of the Mastiff. It was so unlike the breed. Norbu thought about the night, and said, "Masters, and Old Man Dawa, for I too know you, there was indeed something strange that happened during the night. It was my two yaks. They were sleeping peacefully and were as disturbed as any living being could have been during such a stormy night. My Mastiff was sleeping close to me, and I was thankful for the warmth that it provided me. And then, suddenly, the yaks stood up, quietly, not grunting, inside the tent, and were wide-awake. I was worried that they would charge out into the rains and tried to get them to relax. They did not do so. They were very tense. They stood for about an hour, as though they sensed some strange spirits or demons outside the tent. Their tails were held high, and yet they did not grunt. Their breathing became very heavy and the smoke from their nostrils made it look like fog clouds had entered our tent. And then, suddenly, they sat down again and went to sleep. The Mastiff never barked at all."

The rainstorm had damaged the tented eateries at Shiquanhe through the night. Hariram Maharaj and Luo Tsering went about examining the tents and the damage. They seemed to have been lucky as compared to other tented eateries in the region outside Shiquanhe, on the road to Darchen. Most other eateries and their sheds were blown away or destroyed. Luo Tsering's eatery seemed to be quite intact. It must have been due to the protection from the nearby police station that was taller than the eatery, and stood in the way of the direction of the rainstorm and the wind that blew it around.

The vehicles that had been brought inside the tent were safe and it had been sensible to do so, thought Maharaj. It had been Luo's sudden idea and initially Maharaj had thought it was a crazy thing to do. The morning after the rainstorm showed the damage done to the vehicles that had been left out in the open during the night. More than fifty pilgrims had stayed inside the tented eatery through the night. Some were going towards Darchen and some were on their return from the *kora*. There were some local townspeople with their bicycles who had rushed in at night.

Maharaj and Luo knew most of the locals, pilgrim guides and were also familiar with some of the pilgrim groups, for they had stopped at the eatery earlier. They got their kitchen boys to start preparing soup and noodles for breakfast. Luo's wife began preparing the extra-sweet tea and *Tsampa* separately for the local Tibetans. One of the boys began to heat up the earlier night's leftover yak meat soup and potatoes in a separate bowl in the adjoining tent. The pilgrim groups knew about Luo's separation of vegetarian and non-vegetarian food and accordingly began to move about.

There were two pilgrims sitting near the stove, warming themselves, and looking outside the tent, perhaps wondering about if it was safe enough to travel. Luo was curious about them. He spoke to Maharaj in a low voice, in Tibetan, “Maharaj, do you see those two there, near the stove? They came in quite late, when it was almost sure that it would be a bad night. They were walking on their own. They are not local Tibetans and neither do they look like Changpa nomads. Do you know anything about them?”

Maharaj had picked up more than a good understanding of Tibetan, but could not speak it fluently, and spoke in his pidgin language that he had made up. Luo could understand it, for the conversation usually was about activity within the eatery or about religion or god and godmen. Maharaj said, “I do not know them. They are not from any pilgrim group. They look quite rested and are not tired. They must be going to the *kora*, or may be trading in goods in this region. Are you sure that they are not Changpa? Their dress looks quite like the villagers from Eastern Tibet.”

Luo was sure. He knew the Changpas, for they came in regularly to trade with him. He bought meat, salt and other spices that they brought to sell. They had an easy smuggling route from Eastern Tibet to Ladakh that they had used for more than hundreds of years. It was said that there were more Changpas in Ladakh in India than there should have been in their own lands in Eastern Tibet. They were good tradesmen and brought in a good reliable supply of spices, grains, pulses and branded goods from India. Maharaj needed those spices and pulses to cook his trademark food for the Hindu, Sikh,

Jain and Buddhist pilgrims from India. He would never have eaten such food at Qinhai, from where he had come from, and neither had his wife in her village.

Maharaj went to the stove and began getting his special utensils ready. The “strictly vegetarian” pilgrims from India liked to see him in action, and actually see him cook. They knew that he could be trusted to keep his utensils and plates and bowls separately and “clean” and not to pollute them with the beef-eaters. A group of pilgrims from Gujarat, especially from Navsari, had come on an exclusive pilgrimage to the Mount Kailash, to the Hindus among them, and to the *Ashtapad*, to the Jains among them. The great Mountain *Kang Renpoche*, was all-inclusive, and was known by different names to the different religious groups who struggled and made their once-in-a-lifetime journey to do the ultimate of all pilgrimages.

The Navsari pilgrims were on their return journey from the sacred Mountain. The pilgrim guide with them was also from Navsari, though he was settled in Ahmedabad. The Jain group amongst them had a junior monk from the Navsari area. The pilgrim guide and the Jain monk were whispering between them and looking furtively at the two strange pilgrims sitting near the stove. Maharaj called out to them, and spoke in Gujarati, “Bapu, Pranaam. Greetings. It was a terrible night. We are all lucky. The blessings that your holy man has sought during the *kora* has stayed with you, and we are all safe. Come and get some honest and good Indian Tea. I have put real ginger, brought all the way from India. It will make you feel better. Bring your entire group nearby to the stove. It will be warm here.”

The local townspeople and Tibetans and policemen from the nearby outpost were gathering at the other tent. Luo and his wife served local Chiang breakfast. The lunch and dinner was usually cooked in three cuisines, Chiang, Sichuan and Xinjiang. But breakfast was always the fast way out, and the easy way, simple Chiang style. It was all meat, in the soup, in the noodles and mixed up in the *Tsampa*. The earlier evening's yak meat curry was gulped down as soon as it had been served. The bowls were welcomed with happy grunts and smiles. They now waited for the slower cooked breakfast with happiness, since they now had something inside their stomachs.

Maharaj was getting curiouser about the two strange pilgrims. They should have gone to the other tent and grabbed the meat soup and yak meat. They did not seem to be interested. They were waiting for vegetarian breakfast? That was really unusual. Did Changpa nomads eat vegetarian food exclusively? The pilgrim guide and the Jain monk from Navsari came to stand alongside Maharaj. They stretched their hands towards the fire at the stove and warmed them. The helper boys passed on cups of Tea to all the pilgrims including the two mysterious men.

Maharaj began to roll out his famous *aloo-parathas*, the ones that local Tibetans were very curious about, and were always standing around watching him stuff spicy and cooked mashed potatoes inside rolled out wheat bread, ready to be heated and made ready to eat with curry. The pilgrim guide from Navsari spoke to Maharaj in Hindi, "O Maharaj, thank you for giving us tea that makes us feel that we are already back in Gujarat. I want to ask you something, and that's why I speak to you in Hindi and not in Gujarati. Is that ok? I spoke with my

Jain brother, and holy master, and we wanted to ask you if you know anything about these two men? They look like they are from this place, but we want to know if you know them?"

The Jain monk said, also in Hindi, "There is a reason, Maharaj, why we speak in Hindi and not in Gujarati. These two men were with us at the *kora*. They were not with us, but they were nearby and we saw them on many occasions. We did not think too much about them but what we heard at night, when we were all sheltering during the rainstorm, makes us curious. And what we saw or did not see during the *kora*, about these two men, makes us more curious. Do you know them?"

Maharaj was puzzled. He had thought that these two men had come to Shiquanhe to proceed to Darchen, for they did not look too tired or exhausted. Why would Navsari pilgrims want to talk in Hindi and not in Gujarati? That was really strange, he thought. He replied, "No, my brothers. I do not know them. What was strong about what you heard at this place, during the night?"

The pilgrim guide said, "Maharaj, you know that we are from Navsari. We are therefore familiar with different types of Gujarati, Hindi and Kutchi languages. These two men who look like they are from Tibet, they were talking a strange and not-so-familiar language that we have heard only in Navsari. It's not Gujarati. They talked the language of the ancient priests of the people from Iran, the Parsis. It was not actually the language that we hear from everyday from the Parsis we meet. It was very different. But we sensed it to be the type of ancient Parsi that their priests recite when we attend their weddings

and religious functions. It was not entirely the same, but was similar.”

The Jain monk added, “Yes. It was that. What was strange was that these two men were with twelve other pilgrims when they came by our group at Darchen, when we had completed our *kora*, and they went ahead with them and returned from Tarboche itself. The twelve other pilgrims went ahead. Why would you go all the way to Tarboche to leave your companions?”

Vijay Kulkarni had stayed up awake through the rainstorm during the night inside his 4-person alpine tent near the Manasarovar Lake. Their camp was near a village settlement at some distance from the lake. They had pitched their tents outside a school’s compound wall. The buildings and the nearby prayer hall had offered some protection to the group from the hailstorm that had crashed down during the night. The storm had ceased after dawn, and surprisingly the morning fog and chilly wind was absent.

He walked around the tented area looking out at the deceptively still waters of the Manasarovar Lake. The waves were lapping at the shore and one could hear the faint sound. It meant that the morning was very silent in the village. That was strange, thought Vijay. He should have been hearing the Mastiffs and other village dogs barking their heads off. The domestic yaks sitting nearby

were also quiet. Possibly everyone, humans and animals, were all tired in trying to survive through the night.

His colleagues had not stirred out of their tents. They knew that there would be no moving about until the sun had come out and there would be no sign of any repeat storm. The group was taking the opportunity to sleep in and gather some much needed rest. Vijay walked near the school compound gates and looked in. Several trekking and pilgrim groups had set up their tented camps inside the compound. The school building had been constructed on three sides around an open playground. It had been a sensible choice. The tents had not blown away and there did not seem any damage. The school gates could also prevent disturbance from the village dogs and yaks.

Vijay walked back to his tent and looked in. His team was waking up and moving around. Himanshu and Paramita came out and joined him in moving around. They were hydrogeologists, and had come on the expedition to collect rock samples and study the region. This area was like a godsend opportunity for them and they enjoyed the aspect that Vijay and other trekking leaders would be worrying about the logistics. It was a mixed group, comprising trekkers, pilgrims, hydrogeologists, inland fishery experts, wildlifers, photographers, birdwatchers and tour guides.

Each group had their own agenda. They did their own thing while the tour guides and trekking leaders kept them moving within an agenda. The Chinese did not like anyone wandering around and usually frowned upon any informal studies that had not been permitted. Fair enough, thought Vijay, we would have done the same

thing in India, and we would not have done that only to the Chinese. We would have stopped one another also from studying whatever is usually obvious to each of us.

Himanshu asked, “Vijayrao, what happened to you at night? I did not see you sleep at all. You seemed to be moving about in the tent through the night. You had also walked out during the rain and kept going in and out. What happened? Upset stomach?” Paramita laughed, for she knew that Himanshu liked to keep making fun of Vijay. She added, “No, that cannot be. Vijay Sir does not ever have an upset stomach. He has moved about in so many wild areas and he has eaten all types of food. His stomach cannot be upset. He must have been moving about trying to take photographs of the rain and thinking of trekking in the heavy downpour or in the hailstorm.”

Vijay smiled at their banter. He knew them from old times, even Paramita. She had been a post-graduate student at the University of Pune and was a keen geologist. Himanshu had made her into a serious hydrogeologist and an expedition addict. They had accompanied him on many expeditions and were genuine in their work and much accomplished. Vijay replied, “No upset stomach. I do not know what happened to me. I could not sleep at all. I sat in the tent for quite some time. I was very curious. A strange situation had occurred. The dogs in the town were not barking. It was raining very heavily. I felt that it was such a waste. Here we were, up at the shadow of the Mount Kailash and on the banks of the Manasarovar Lake. An opportunity of more than a lifetime, and it was raining. And we were hiding inside a tent when we had some of the best rainproof kit and dresses with us. Why hide inside? I decided to go outside and watch the rain.”

“So why are looking so different,” asked Paramita, “you seem so very different. You look strange and weird all over. What happened? Did one of the dogs pounce on you, or did the yaks charge at you? You look like you were scared to death, with all your hair standing on end, and you are walking about extremely nervously, jittery and all scared.”

Vijay nodded. He was glad that the subject had come up so soon. He wanted to get it off his chest and talk to his friends. He said, “I had a really weird night. It was weird throughout the night. So many incidents that happened are all strange. Not a single incident or a disturbance, but it was all so very different. I was walking about, all kitted out, and I do not think I was seen in the rain, because my kit is all-black, and it was an all-black night out here, with the rain pouring in like there was nothing else in nature.”

“About 2 am or so, I saw the mastiffs and other dogs from the village. They were all whimpering. They were not getting wet. They were all hiding deep inside the school porch and in the open porch of the prayer halls. They were not getting wet and were quite dry. But, they were all whimpering. It was very strange. And then, I saw the yaks. They should have been sheltering and should have been inside their sheds and places where their people would have moved them to protect them from the rains.”

Vijay continued, “The yaks were standing out in the rains, bunched up and all wet. They were watching the Kailash peak. They did not move from the spot, and did not move their gaze away from the peak. I kept walking

around, and realized that all domestic yaks had come to stand together. Something was happening. Were they seeing ghosts? If there were ghosts or demons or evil spirits around, why were they watching the Kailash peak?"

Himanshu interrupted, "Vijayrao, this is a strange place, we knew that. The local stories are full of demons, gods, good and evil spirits and humans possessed with strange powers. Why cannot the yaks have their part in it? But what you say is strange. Why should all the yaks come together? They do not know each other, and all the yaks in this village would not be related. They come from various villages, towns, prefectures and communities. They are so many hybrids. Why would they stand together, and that too, in this heavy rain? It does not make any sense."

"I agree," said Vijay, "I thought the same. I looked around to see if there was any human walking around. There was none. I walked around the yak herd, staying quite far away, until I was in a straight line behind them, and the Manasarovar Lake was behind me. I was in the line from the Manasarovar Lake to the yaks that had gathered. I could see what they were seeing. I was also watching the Mount Kailash. I tell you, Himanshu, Paramita, this place is really strange."

"It was about 3 am or so, thereabout. It was raining heavily here, and so was it raining through the Lake and the area to Mount Kailash. But, as I kept watching the yaks, the rain seemed to have stopped at the Mount Kailash peak areas, at night, while it was raining everywhere else. The Mount Kailash and its peaks were all shining brightly. I could see the moon shining

extremely bright, and the snowy peak was as brilliant as it was day out there. It stayed like that for about an hour or so. And suddenly, I could no longer see the peak. The rains had started out there, I guess.”

“During that time, the yaks stood still, bunching tighter and tighter, watching the Kailash peak. They stood that way, even when the rains had started out there on the peaks. I came back to our tent and sat for some time. You two were sleeping so peacefully, that I had no mind to disturb you. I came out at about 4.30 am, and the yaks had gone and there was no animal or human being moving about. The dogs were still whimpering on the school building’s porch.”

Vijay continued, “Something happened out there on the Kailash peak that the yaks here, so far away, and the dogs, dangerous at other times, knew about. They seemed to know that something was happening out there. How can we stay here, not knowing about it? I want to change the plans for our expedition. Let us go out to the *kora* once again. I want to go to the nearby monasteries and the pilgrim trail and ask one and all about what happened out there. I wonder if someone was witness to whatever happened.”

Sangye, the great old Qinhai nomad horseman, was restless at Dirapuk, having waited for the rainstorm to subside. He feared for the worst, for Dirapuk and the Drolma La Pass were the highest places on the *kora* around the *Kang Renpoche*. He prayed that snow or frozen carpets of water would not follow the rainstorm on the pilgrim's trail. The yaks would slip with their luggage and could break their legs. Who would take care of them? It was difficult to get medical help in these regions and the animals had the worst of the pilgrimages.

He knew that he had taken care of the safety of his horses, yaks, mules and ponies. He had also made sure that his mastiffs were protected. The sun came out later on the hidden valleys north of Dirapuk and Sangye waited inside the shed that he had built of stones, old bricks, scavenged tin sheets, canvas cloth and camouflaged army webbing. The shed was more of a single wall that helped him and his family to stay within the mountain overhang that backed out to a series of caves. One could not see the caves from below, in the valley, or from the tented settlements at Dirapuk. The Qinhai old man protect all humans and animals in his care in the overhang.

One end of the caves and the overhang stretched out to the settlement of tented eateries, camping areas, cemented rooms that protected the foodstuffs and ducks. From his hideout, Sangye could look into the valley above Dirapuk, stretching north-west away from the *Kang Renpoche*, and higher towards the other peaks that were much lower. He could also see down the trail towards the Choku monastery and upwards, towards the east, to the Drolma La Pass. He called out to Yeshe and

they walked to the edge of their settlement and watched the pilgrims and others move around near Dirapuk.

Yeshe called out to Bzanba and Kangryi, the *Tsang Khyi* mastiff dogs, who did not move out from the shadows inside the caves. Sangye remarked, "Leave them be, they must be hesitant to go out so early, after the rainstorm. Let us go out and see what has happened to all our stuff. The storm was quite heavy and has gone away just about after the dawn." They walked out to the edge of the stone edge, above the spread of tents that had come up in the evening and night and watched. People were moving about. Some trekkers were walking up towards the tented eatery that Yeshe's parents managed.

Sangye could see Yeshe's parents had woken up earlier and the women-helpers were also active, beginning to heat up soup bowls, hot water and tea. The pilgrims would welcome the sugary tea and soup. Very soon, they would also be looking forward to some hot and appetizing breakfast. The old man was happy with the cup of tea that he had in his hand. He grabbed Yeshe by his shoulders and began walking to the rear end of the stony overhang. The passages from the valleys were usually good indicators of snow to come, or of sudden floods that were hiding away. Yeshe's parents had planted vegetables in tents made of army webbing material.

The tents protected the vegetables from the sharp chill and night and morning dew. As they approached the tents, Sangye and Yeshe called out to each other, pointing out the terrible destruction that seemed to have occurred during the night. The two largest tents seemed to have been pulled down. The smaller tents were all

standing intact. The largest tents were towards the mountain trail that came down from the higher valleys and were along the mountain river stream that flowed amongst tall boulders.

Yeshe spoke first, “Is that not strange, the larger tents have fallen while the smaller ones are standing and there does not seem to have been any damage to them.” The old man nodded, and rushed to the area of damage. The tent pegs seemed to have been pulled out in a row, and the tents had merely fallen over the planted vegetables. The crop was not destroyed. The tents had to merely be pulled back once again. He examined the pegs closely. He had pushed them in when they had put up the tents and he knew that he had hammered them in to quite a depth. How had they come to be pulled up? He noticed a stranger aspect. The pegs between the two tents had been pulled up. The pegs on the other sides of the tents were intact and there was no disturbance to them, or any sort of damage. So why did the pegs along the passage between the tents removed?

Sangye and Yeshe rushed to the trail between the two large tents. The trail came down from the upper slopes of the valley and went towards the lower slopes to the east of the Dirapuk tents and settlements. The trail had followed the river stream from the upper slopes and had come away because of the big boulders that had come down during an earlier avalanche and landslide that must have happened at least fifty or hundred years ago. The two tents had been established on either side of the narrow trail. There was hardly any movement in this region, and especially during the rainstorm, no person or animal would have dared to move around in the upper slopes.

Yeshe wondered, “Why would all the tent pegs be pulled up? Who would have the strength to pull them out? All the tents along this trail have been pulled up. What sort of animal, and what sort of strength would have pulled out these tent pegs, and so many of them?” The old man nodded in agreement, and looked closely and wandered about. “Yeshe, look closely. All tent pegs have been pulled out in one direction only. Something or somebody has come down this trail, and the tents have been pulled out as they came down. Whatever it was, it was very strong. Extremely strong.”

The trail was quite wide, and yet it narrowed near the vegetable tents. This was the first year that Yeshe’s parents had tried to grow vegetables in this high location. It had worked out well even though it was still an experimental challenge. The local villagers at Dirapuk or at Darchen did not know about the experiment in any detail. They had laughed about it when they heard it from the women helpers or from the shepherds who went up the trail to search for wandering sheep. Sangye looked at the trail above the tent area. There were no forests here. The grass clumps were the only vegetation.

The upper trail was almost five metres wide at the nearest spot in the valley above, when it left the river and came away because of the high boulders. It must have been a herd, moving down the slopes to escape the rainstorm. Chiru antelope would not have the strength to pull out the pegs. Kiangs were not known to hide in the upper slopes. Which other animal was known in these higher slopes, he wondered. Yeshe stood alongside the old man, and the two Qinhai nomads tried to visualize

what must have happened in the night. Whatever came down, the large herd of animals was very strong, and needed a lot of walking space. This herd walked together. They needed to get away from the upper slopes.

“Where would they go?” asked Sangye, in spoken thought, almost in a whisper, “Yeshe, my boy, why would animals this strong require to get away from the upper slopes? They were not coming down because they were scared, my boy, they were coming down because they were going somewhere. Where would they go? This trail is crowded with pilgrims, trekkers and very good wildlifers and local villagers. There would be immediate mention if such a herd, of very strong animals, were to be seen moving around.”

“I think these animals waited for the rainstorm to come. They were waiting for a moment in this region of the *kora*, when they would be sure, absolutely sure, that nobody would be moving about. The rainstorm provided the opportunity. They were going somewhere and were in a stubborn hurry about it, and were walking in the storm in the dark night. The ropes of the tent pegs must have been just a mere hindrance to the strength of these animals. Whatever this was, it was a herd of very large and very strong animals. They could not be chiru or kiang or wild horses or domestic yaks. Even wild yaks that we know are not known from these higher valleys.”

Yeshe looked around in amazement. His grandfather was correct. There was no sign of any other damage. Even the vegetables had not been trampled upon. The tents had been left lying where they had fallen down when the pegs were pulled out. He looked at the ground, where the

morning dew had settled in along the river edge and pointed, “Look, there, at that dew that has collected in the edge of the grass clump. It’s a clear trail. That’s a yak’s footprint. But, look at the size and the depth of the footprint in the mud and grass. That is not a regular wild yak or a domestic one. This one was very large. This animal was very heavy. And, if it was a herd of great strength, this was a herd of wild yaks, very large, moving down this valley to the trail of the *kora*. Where did they go? Where did they come from? Why do they hide from one and all in this valley?”

The tented eatery at Darchen was crowded with pilgrims and local villagers queuing up for hot soup and tea in the morning. The rainstorm had ended an hour earlier and the pilgrims began to move around. The vehicles were moved out of the tents, where they had been kept to protect them from the hailstorm. The tables were rearranged and two additional hot water dispensers were kept outside the tent. Pilgrims came up to the hot water tanks and filled up their bowls to help them wash up and get ready for the day. This was not a daily provision, but after the rainstorm, the eatery owner felt that it would help the pilgrims feel welcome at his establishment.

Shenshe, the Chinese policeman, had slept in the eatery, while waiting out the rainstorm. He had chosen a good warm corner, and had used the large round bolsters and

the mattress in place of the sleeping bags that others were using. The Buddhist monk from Nalanda and the Sikh holy man from Amritsar in India had slept nearby. Their luggage was kept between them. The presence of the Chinese policeman inside the tent had prevented any enterprising quick-fingered thief from exploring the bags while the pilgrims slept through the stormy night.

This was a strange world, thought Shenshe. His family and his elder relatives had warned him about not going crazy in Tibet. He had expected that he would be posted to some remote location in Tibet and would not be able to get back to his family as often as he would have wished to. He had however not expected to be posted in this remote circus, as he often called it. Everyday was different. It was not like Lhasa, where every policeman was supposed to be extremely alert and watchful. This place was a different country each day, as he had determined.

Every day he saw new people, from different places in Tibet, from other countries and from all communities. Each visitor had his own reason for coming here. For every visitor, it seemed to be a journey of a lifetime. Most people came from places that did not have high mountains. For Tibetans also, this place was an important pilgrimage. Chinese tourists and pilgrims from other parts of China had begun to journey here. Shenshe wondered about this strange meeting place. The highest in the world, as he often heard others discussing the pilgrimage.

Yesterday, he had learnt something quite new. The Buddhist monk from Nalanda was Tibetan, but he was not from Tibet. He was third generation born in India,

and came from a monastery that was not within a Tibetan exile enclave. He was traveling with a person from an entirely different religion, very unlike the one that he practiced. Was it allowed? Every pilgrim from India seemed so very different. This other pilgrim was from a community that he had rarely met. He had seen them in other cities in China, very occasionally, and sometimes in Lhasa. He had also seen a couple of them on the newly introduced train to Lhasa. But he had never met one in Darchen or heard of a Sikh pilgrim on the *kora*.

The Sikh pilgrim seemed to know everything about the *kora* and about the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain. He called it the Sumeru Mountain. That was something new, Sheshe thought. He had memorized all the names for the mountain, and when he had thought he had them all, this Sikh pilgrim had called it by yet another name. They were sleeping peacefully. However, he had noticed that the Sikh pilgrim had not slept during the night. He had been sitting up through the night, facing the mountain, meditating or chanting. He had been using his prayer beads and reciting slowly. The Buddhist monk had sat up once or twice, and watched him quietly, and had gone back to sleep.

Once the Sikh had gone out of the tent, dressed up in a good rain jersey, and had stood at the entrance area. Shenshe kept watching him. The Sikh seemed disturbed and he had kept moving in and out of the tent, with his prayer beads. He would go outside the tent and stand, looking around and searching for something. The Buddhist monk from Nalanda woke up twice and looked at the Sikh pilgrim and smiled at his restlessness, and went back to sleep. Shenshe wondered about it. He

assumed that it must have been because of the strange location and the proximity of the holy mountain that he had come this far, in search of answers to questions within his religion.

Shenshe waited for the two pilgrims to wake up. He sat nearby, in a relaxed manner, suspecting that the day would be very long and there would be too many things to attend to. He wanted to pick up on the opportunity of sitting down in peace that he had obtained, and he would maximize it. The police outpost was nearby, but the other police constables had gone away to Shiquanhe and had been expected to return. They would have been held up due to the rainstorm, he thought.

He joined the owner of the tented eatery for breakfast at his invitation. The hot noodles, soup and tea was extremely welcome. Meanwhile, the two pilgrims had woken up and cleaned up. They packed up their sleeping bags and haversacks. They seemed to be carrying separate tent kits also, observed Shenshe. At his gesture, the owner of the eatery invited the two pilgrims to sit with them for breakfast. The Sikh pilgrim sat down next to the Chinese policeman, and placed his hands together in prayer, and recited a couple of sentences to himself.

Not able to contain his curiosity, Shenshe asked, “O Mr. Singh, you did not sleep well. I saw that you were sitting up and meditating through the night. You were walking around and went out in the rain also. Something was disturbing you. Are you ok? Everything ok? No problem? Is your stomach doing fine with the miserable food of this Tibetan hotels? Not like Beijing, you know.”

The owner of the tented eatery and the Buddhist monk from Nalanda did not respond to the bait of the Chinese policeman about Tibet. Everything about the high mountains of Tibet seemed to be miserable to the Han Chinese, thought the monk from Nalanda, for he had been told of the years of oppression and the persecution of Tibetans over the past many decades. He had not expected that it would be so deeply ingrained amongst the common everyday people of China and Tibet. They should be grateful, he thought, for all their waters come from Tibet. If not for the *Kang Renpoche*, the people of China would have been destroyed in history, a long long time ago.

“Sardar Amarpal Singh of Amritsar”, said the Buddhist monk, and translated the questions that Shenshe had asked, “I had also noticed that you had a very disturbed night, though you were in constant prayer. Do tell us what was it that was disturbing you, so very badly. I had thought of asking you at night, but each time I woke, I saw you with your prayer beads and prayer books. I did not have the courage to disturb you at that time.”

The Sikh pilgrim bowed to Sheshe, and with the Buddhist monk translating for him, he spoke slowly. He said, “Yes. You are a true policeman, I can see. In India, also, I am always watched. People do not understand me. My brothers, Sikhs in service to the temple understand what I can experience. I cannot explain in detail. I am able to sense or experience or go into a trance when I focus on divinity. I can sit peacefully for meditation. I do not need food or water until I come out.”

“But, what happened yesterday, at night, during the rainstorm, was very strange. I am usually able to sit

down for meditation even on a crowded street or inside a railway train. There are always people at our temple, and yet, I keep reading the holy books with peace in my heart. But, yesterday, I could not pray at all. I tried my best. I kept stopping and starting and stopping and starting all the time. I could not even complete one round of my prayer beads.”

“I went out of the tent, many times,” Amarpal continued, “I tried to seek strength from the *Sumeru* mountain. I called out to my Guru. But there was something that prevented me from talking to my God, from doing my prayers, and from reciting the holy name, as I have been taught to do so, and as I have done for so many years, in my beloved Amritsar. I went out to try to see the holy mountain, and failed to do so.”

“And then, at one time, when I closed my eyes and focused entirely on my *waheguru*, my guide and my inspiration, I saw a miracle. In the midst of the rainstorm, I could see the *Sumeru* Mountain, shining in the moonlight. The rain had stopped falling on Sumeru and the moon was out there, shining brightly. The snowy cap of the Sumeru was so brilliant, I was lost for words to myself, to describe it. And then, it was gone. The rains were back on the Sumeru. The peak disappeared from view, once again. I was, once again, not able to recite my prayers properly. What would have happened out there? I need to go to the Sumeru Mountain and explore.”

Sangye and Yeshe walked around the broken tent trail and searched for sight of more tracks of the herd of large yaks. They could not find any sign along the tents. It was amazing, thought Sangye, for he had heard of such a herd in stories that his great grandfather would tell of one visit to the *Kang Renpoche* when he had returned to the Qinhai plains after a pilgrimage. He had been almost blind and had to stay back in the village when others would go out in search of wild horses for trapping and herding. Most villagers had merely heard the stories and had smiled in indulgence and gone about their work.

Sangye stood quietly, on the trail, looking at the mountains above the Dirapuk areas and the Drolma La Pass region. These were unknown mountains, and there had been no explorations, and no known hunters from many years who had entered these areas. He had heard of no one who had gone and returned. He watched the slopes, the turns, the gorges, the passes, the cliffs, the peaks and the smaller peaks. These mountains could hide such a mystery. A herd of ten thousand large wild yaks would have easily hidden themselves inside these ranges, he told himself.

He had come to the *Kang Renpoche* hills and valleys, for so many years, in search of talk and gossip of wild horses and trade of rare breeds of Tibetan animals. He was no longer strong enough to go inside these mountain ranges to hunt and lay down traps and track the trails of wild animals for it would take long weeks to do so. His own son, Yeshe's father, was not interested in the art of tracking and tracing a trail. It required lots of patience and offered almost no returns, except the thrill of moving about in the mountains. It required you to be at one with these magnificent mountains and ranges. Yeshe

may still pick up on these skills. Such a legend as this, the trail of the large wild yaks could be just the answer, he thought.

“Come, Boy, lets go back to the house, and think about what is to be done,” Sangye said, walking slowly, deep in thought, and spoke a prayer, “Yeshe, you, of my own blood, this could be very well a true fact, that large wild yaks did come down the mountain trail from the higher ranges. There was such a story and talk, but that was of a time long before even your father was born. This mountain has blessed us, with what fate will have for us in the future. Come, bow your heads, and thank the most enlightened one, and thank the thousand Buddhas who came to Tibet, and thank the Dharmakaya Amitabha Buddha, for opening up the magic of these mountains. We have much to be thankful for.”

Yeshe knew that his grandfather believed that every mountain in these ranges, around the *Kang Renpoche* was a Buddha, and that the old man was also convinced that each mountain was a living being. He stood next to Sangye, bowed his head in prayer, but try as he could, he could not focus, for his thoughts were racing. Large wild yaks? Taller than the tallest wild yak? Heavier than the heaviest wild yak? Not one, but many? Could it be true? Was such a thing possible? They had walked down a single trail. There were several other trails in the region, and they chose to walk between the tent lines on this trail? They would have never known or suspected if they would have come down any other trail.

Sangye knew his grandson well. He knew that he would be extremely curious and excited. He was like he had been at that age. Sometimes he wondered if his own son

had betrayed him by not becoming a trailsman or a hunter. He had set up shop and started cooking food. How could he do so? Was that all that life had to offer? These mountains, the tallest of the world, these valleys, the most mysterious of all, the animals, the trees, the clouds and the gods. Where would you get all these in the world? These were all here. Sangye waited patiently for his grandson to start with his questions and wondered if he would be true to his blood and ask to be allowed on the trail.

For now, it would have to wait, thought Sangye. We need to know if there would be tracks of the herd of large wild yaks down in the Lhachu valley. There could be sign on the mountain streams, and there could have been sightings by others in the valley. This was one of the most crowded valley in the area, with the number of pilgrims and movement of animals and the establishment of tented eateries and camping areas.

The old man and his grandson walked out of the trail and returned to the eatery. Sangye pointed towards Dirapuk. There seemed to be some activity going on. Two monks, of different coloured robes, and old trailhand and guide and a young yak-boy accompanied by two yaks and a mastiff pup were walking near one of the mountain streams, looking at the ground, as if search of a trail. Could it be so obvious, he wondered. They must be searching for tracks of the wild yaks. Let Yeshe pull his own deductions. He would now know if his grandson was a future trailhound or not.

Yeshe spoke, with excitement, "Grandfather, look at that group of people. They are not looking up or around and they are not walking away from each other. And they are

not close to each other. They are walking about, looking at the ground, and they are walking about in a wide circle. They are searching for something. Could it be that they are searching for trail of the large wild yaks? They must have known something. Can we go there and see about what is going on?"

Sangye smiled, with happiness in his heart, and said, "Yeshe, it could be. And yet, it may not be. But let us go there and find out. But slow down, my boy, and do not tell them about what it was that we saw on the trail above our eatery. It may frighten people and pilgrims and your parents would lose their trade. Let us first know about what is it that they search for. Let us be sure, absolutely sure."

Yeshe nodded in agreement. He had not thought of the danger of disclosing such information. A drop in trade, even for a couple of days, would destroy their meagre business. They depended on the income of each day, while out here. He decided against calling out to his dogs, and went down in a small run to join up with his grandfather, who could walk quite fast on the slopes. It was on the plain flat ground that the old man walked very slowly. As he would usually remark, the plain grounds were not meant for walking, it had to be ridden on horses or mules or yaks. It was the slopes that were meant for climbing.

They met up with the monks and the old pilgrim guide and the yak-boy. The old guide and Sangye seemed to know each other. They bowed in respect. Sangye went up to the monk from the Dirapuk monastery and offered his respects, with his palms brought together, and said, "O Master, you who are blessed with the opportunity to

be in service and in constant prayer to the most enlightened one, I greet you. It is indeed a sacred blessing, for, in the shadow of this great mountain, I am able to meet with you, and with the monk from the Choku monastery, as his robes make him out to be. You seem to be in search of something. Did something get washed down from the monastery?"

Dawa, the old pilgrim guide, smiled at the Qinhai horseman's guile and curiosity, and replied, "Great horseman from Qinhai, you are a patient bird that circles these mountains in search of what you seek, for so many years. So did your father, and so did his father before him. I know you from many years. Drop the pretense. You are coming down the trail from where we stand. You must have seen spoor and trail of what we search for here. Or, you would never have come down from the warmth of your eatery, where your son cooks hot soup in the morning instead of running ahead of you."

Brother Tameng and the monk from Dirapuk smiled at this banter. They were used to the talk and the tradition of discussion in this part of Tibet. The monk from Dirapuk spoke, "O Sangye, I greet you. This is Norbu who is a yak-boy with the tour group from Shiquanhe. His two yaks that were with him, inside his tent to hide from the rainstorm behaved strangely at night. His mastiff seems to have been very scared and timid at night. He is walking about quietly even now. And, Brother Tameng from the Choku monastery has a really mysterious story to tell us, he says. Let us hear him. For now, we are following old Dawa, in looking at the river stream, and to see if it would tell of anything that moved through the night."

Sangye replied, “O Masters, and old Dawa, I understand. From what Norbu has told you, and of what Dawa is looking for, and he is correct that I come to meet you with purpose, is it possible that you are all searching for spoor and trail of a herd of wild yaks? Very large wild yaks?”

IV

Brother Tameng and Dawa looked at each other and smiled. The monk from Dirapuk spoke out, “What? What large wild yaks are you talking about? There are no wild yaks near the Dirapuk area and neither are they known from this valley. What are you talking about, Qinhai horseman? Yeshe, what is your grandfather saying?” Norbu looked scared. No wonder his yaks had behaved strangely. Why did his mastiff go weird then? Are mastiffs scared of wild yaks, he wondered?

Dawa spoke to the monk from Dirapuk, bowing, “O Master, please forgive us. Brother Tameng and I, we are scared. We are worried that people will not believe us. We have not spoken to anyone. That’s why we did not tell you about our search. The Dirapuk to Drolma La area, and the slopes between the two places, are the entrance to the valley from the North. We wanted to scout for sign on these riverbeds and the smooth sand before it was filled up with pilgrims and trekkers walking around. The domestic yak would have destroyed all trail.”

Norbu, Yeshe and Sangye stood close together, alongside the monk from Dirapuk. Brother Tameng bowed in reverence to the sacred mountain peaks, one by one, and added, “Brothers, you are all devout people, tied to your circle of life, and to this sacred mountain. What happened yesterday was very strange, and we could not have imagined that such a thing would come to pass. We do not want to add to the mystery. We want to search for what could be possible. For what has happened can have several reasons. We will discuss them later. We need to think fast, before the valley gets crowded.”

“Yesterday, at night, through the rainstorm, old man Dawa, and I, with permission from my Master Rinchen, moved about near the Choku monastery slopes. I will tell you the rest of the events later, but we saw very large, really large wild yaks. We saw an entire herd of these animals. They were enormous. At least one or two feet taller than the largest wild yak you would have seen or heard about. At least 300 to 400 kilos heavier than the heaviest wild yak you would have known or been told about. We are not bluffing. We saw them. They were huge. All. Not a single animal in the herd was smaller than any other,” Brother Tameng continued.

“We do not want to waste time. It is very important that we know what we saw was true and we should know what really happened. I will tell you the other details later. But something truly different happened out there in the rainstorm. Now, old man from Qinhai, how are you able to ask us the exact question? What do you know? Have you also seen these wild yaks? Do you know of them? How do you, from far away Qinhai, know about

wild yaks in this valley? Have you seen them at Dirapuk or at Drolma La?"

Sangye looked back at the mountains above, northwards of Dirapuk, and pointed. He said, "They came from there. They came from the valley above Dirapuk. It's a really long valley, and needs about four to five days of riding on a fast horse to go through it. They came from there. I did not see them. Neither did my grandson, here. We saw tracks of the animals. We saw only one track. Not a single track in any other place did we see out there. These were really large animals, I can tell. Old man Dawa and myself, we know each other from many years gone by. What we do not know about these valleys does not exist here at all. But, this was different."

Dawa nodded. He looked up at the valley entrance, above Dirapuk. It could be possible. This contour was in a straight line, from above Dirapuk, down to the Lhachu valley, down the river stream, going past Choku monastery, to the spot where the circle of stones would be. There was no deviation, no turn off, and large animals like those yaks that they had seen, any obstacle would not stop them. The river streams were shallow at night, and they would be getting deeper now, through the day, as the slopes brought the waters down. What was there? Were there more wild yaks in that valley? Where had they gone? Did they return on the same path?

Yeshe was excited. He could sense that Norbu was also very excited, hearing about the herd of large wild yaks. Norbu's mastiff was standing close to him, not moving away. He was looking very scared. He thought back to his own two mastiffs. They had also behaved very strangely. They had not barked, and neither had they

accompanied them in the morning. That was so very unlike them. They would usually be moving about much earlier than Yeshe or Sangye. So what had happened had also frightened the mastiffs?

“Masters, I have a simple question, for I am not a great trailsman as my grandfather is, and am not like old man Dawa. I am like Norbu here, from another land, with my parents and family, with our animals and trade,” said Yeshe, “I am curious about a different aspect. I can understand the excitement about the herd of very large wild yaks. If I exist, someone could be larger than me. If I am hunted, I will hide. I do not see the mystery in what you say. I will definitely move about when I cannot be, will not be, hunted. But, the mystery that I see, is in the mastiffs.”

“Look at Norbu’s mastiff. He looks so timid and scared. Our mastiffs are still hiding in the cave and sheds back beyond the eatery that my parents manage. Something else is happening. It is continuing. You saw the wild yaks at night. We saw trail of the wild yaks that moved through the valley. We do not see them now. But, the mastiffs are acting scared even now, late in the morning. What is wrong with them?”

Sangye patted Yeshe, with pride, and said, “Come, Masters, my friend Dawa, let us go and have some hot soup and noodles. I will show you the trail behind the Dirapuk area. No pilgrim goes up there. That area will not be disturbed. We can find trail and sign out there. That is wild and remote area. The valley will not be good for sign. The rains have flattened out the sand and mud. Waters are feeding the river streams from the slopes. All sign would have been wiped out. Come, be

our guest. We will be honoured, that Masters from the Choku and Dirapuk sacred temples would come to bless us. You must be tired, Master. Do not get misled by old man Dawa. He is full of energy and strength. He does not need food.”

Dawa added, “Yes, Masters. Let us go up the valley. There must be a story out there. I will ask Yeshe’s mother to give you a separate stove and utensils. I will cook soup for you and add my own recipes. Who knows when we will eat again in the day? I fear that we will have a very long day ahead of us. We will also speak to Norbu’s masters and request them to take another yak boy and animals. Norbu has seen his yaks’ behaviour and his mastiff understood that something happened. We will need to keep them with us.”

He spoke to Norbu, “Boy, go and request your pilgrim guide to come and meet us at the eatery. Tell him that the holy master of Dirapuk and Choku want him to meet them. We will talk to him. Will you accompany us today? Are you frightened? You have been blessed, my boy. You are going to be part of the mystery of the valleys of the mountains of *Kang Renpoche*. Go, get him with you to the eatery.”

Norbu smiled with relief. He was getting worried that he would have to travel with the pilgrim group and would go away from the excitement. He had wondered about getting away from the group. He had already decided to pretend to be unwell and stay back at Dirapuk. That would have been bad, for he would have placed the group to trouble. He knew old man Dawa would not be refused. Other yak boys could take his place. For it was only one day’s trail from Dirapuk to Drolma La Pass and

then down to Zitalpuk and to Darchen. He ran to the pilgrim group's tent to talk to his group leader. His mastiff ran alongside him, quietly, without barking.

The group started walking up to the eatery. Brother Tameng held on to the walking stick that Dawa had given him. He was thankful for the support. He had a prayer wheel on the other hand, and was twirling it slowly. He waited to catch his breath, and looked back at the Choku monastery and the valley. He could not believe that he had seen all that he had indeed seen. And, he was happy that the old nomad horseman from Qinhai had also seen trail of the herd of large wild yaks. But, what of the wolves? Should he talk about them?

Yeshe's parents were surprised to see the odd group that walked in. Old man Sangye, with their own son, Yeshe, the two monks, one from Choku and the master from Dirapuk, and old man Dawa. What was going on, wondered Yeshe's father. He rushed to welcome them, bowing low.

Sangye asked for Yeshe's father to get some fresh soup and noodles cooked for the group and also to get buckets of hot water for them to wash up. Brother Tameng patted old man Dawa in his appreciation of Sangye's thoughtfulness. He said, "Old man Dawa, we are either stinking and very smelly, or your friend Sangye is indeed very thoughtful and considerate. Let us get cleaned up and refreshed with food, my friend. Who knows what this day is going to lead us into?"

Dawa smiled and nodded. He knew Sangye and could guess where this would lead towards during the coming hours. The old Qinhai horseman was a pure out and out trailsman. This sort of a mystery was the challenge of his lifetime for him. Dawa felt the same challenge that was inviting him to sink in. Here they were, in the most mysterious place on Earth, and they had thought that they had heard about all the mysteries that were to be known.

Yeshe's mother felt blessed to be serving to the two monks from the monasteries in the valley. They were actually here, in her eatery, sitting down to partake in what she was cooking. This was a story that she would take back with her to Qinhai and she knew that all the women-helpers would take back to Darchen. There would be gossip and stories and rumours that would be woven inside one another, and the final story would not be anything about the real reason that this strangely mixed up group would have for getting together.

She felt that she knew and understood the old man Sangye, better than her own husband did. Yeshe was also similarly attracted to his grandfather, she knew. Her son would never manage an eatery. He was trapped with

them, here, having to take care of the animals and help in the eatery. She saw the tourists, pilgrims and visitors to the valley, those who came in from so many different places, nations and locations, of very different religions and rich and poor and those who had left everything behind them. She knew that her son was better than many among those who visited, even if they were rich and had better equipment.

Sangye was talking to the old man Dawa, while the two monks were washing up in the secluded area of their cave behind the eatery. Two boys and Yeshe were waiting near them to help and provide more buckets of hot water. Old man Dawa was speaking, “Wild yaks are common in the plains and hills away from this region. I have seen herds of more than two hundred wild yaks in one grassy plain. I have hunted them and have skinned some myself. We are familiar with domestic yaks and we live with them all our lives. I know what I saw at night. These were wild yaks that we have never seen.”

The monks came into the eatery, cleaned up and looking eager to join in the discussion. Yeshe’s mother would not allow Sangye and Dawa to sit with the monks until they had gone and cleaned up. She chased them out of the tent. Brother Tameng smiled at the two old men pretending to be frightened of Yeshe’s mother. He bowed in prayer, along with the monk from Dirapuk, before beginning to eat. Yeshe came to them and sat nearby on a small stool, waiting to get them more noodles and soup. His mother came back with tetrapacks of orange juice, “especially smuggled in from Ladakh,” she said, in a whisper.

It was not much of a luxury, but it was certainly a thoughtful gesture on her part. The orange juice and other juice packs, tetrapacks and cans, came in through Ladakh, smuggled in by Changpa nomads, in huge quantities. There were other smuggler gangs along the border with Nepal and the tourist and spiritual circuit certainly welcomed these supplies. Whenever raided or caught, the eatery owners would explain them away as supplies purchased from tour groups.

Norbu entered the eatery with his pilgrim tour owner and came to sit near the two monks. The pilgrim guide, Bipinbhai Shah, was a regular tour operator, who would stay in the valley for more than six months, and had come to the *kora* for the past ten years. He knew his place in an open location, in front of the two monks from the local monastery. Their word was law to the local peoples, and if he refused them, he would not be able to operate in the region. Norbu had not told him much, and he did not know the details or reasons why the boy would not accompany him.

Bipinbhai Shah did not bother too much about the reasons. After all, he was not married to the yak-boy, he thought. He needed two yaks to carry the baggage, and he did not mind it if different yaks took on the burden. But, he was curious. A little bit. Something strange must have happened for the monk from Choku and the monk from Dirapuk to sit in this miserable eatery outside the regular camping areas. He did not even allow his pilgrim group to eat in these tented eateries. His group usually set up their tented places, inside a compound, and cooked their own food. It was safer and cleaner for the tourists and pilgrims.

He sat reverentially on a stool at some distance from the monks. The old pilgrim guide from Choku came up to Bipinbhai and asked for him to allow Norbu to stay back. He told him, “Bhai, I know you from earlier. You are a good and fair man. We need your help. I know Norbu, as I know his family at Shiquanhe. The two monks have decided to travel to some remote areas, and we need Norbu’s help and his two yaks. This is all sudden, and we have no time to go to Darchen and get new help teams. Can you manage without him?”

Bipinbhai nodded in agreement. His mind was thinking fast. This was really weird. This old man was definitely lying. There were many pilgrim guides in the Dirapuk area without any work. Holy men do not just go out wandering in these hills. But, he could not disagree. He was given a bowl of soup. He knew it would be made of vegetable stew, since the two monks were also drinking from similar bowls. He sipped at his bowl politely, knowing that it would be a sacrilege to refuse, and later, bowed and stood up and left the eatery.

Norbu walked out with Bipinbhai and bade farewell. The pilgrim guide was fond of Norbu, since he had accompanied the group on several *kora*. He paid him his entire fees, and added some money in a liberal measure, to retain goodwill. Bipinbhai knew his economics in this region. The added ‘tip’ that he paid to Norbu, he knew, would bind the boy to his pilgrim group as an unpaid obligation. The boy would be back with his yaks and with his pilgrim group for the next year, and he would be more than enthusiastic, thought Bipinbhai, and waved at him, as he went back.

The two yaks and his mastiff, his tents and other baggage, had been brought up to the eatery and had been kept in the custody of two helper-boys from Darchen. The boys knew Norbu, and were excited at these sudden happenings. Something strange must have happened, they gossiped. Norbu returned to the tented eatery and went to sit with Yeshe. The old man Dawa patted him in affection, and said, "Welcome, boy, get some hot soup and noodles inside you. Yeshe's father will get some Darchen boys to feed your yaks and your mastiff."

Brother Tameng and the old horseman, Sangye, had been in discussion with each other. It was the monk from Choku monastery, Brother Tameng, who spoke, as though he had come to a decision after seeking advice from Sangye. He said, "Brothers, we do not know what is to happen in our lives now. The circles of our lives bring us all together, and our circles have met each other. This valley is the most mysterious place on this world. This valley is also the most sacred place on this world. We are fortunate that we are here, and we saw or experienced what we did yesterday."

"We do not know where the herd of large wild yaks went. We do not know what happened to the twelve pilgrims who sat out there in the circle of stones below Choku. Why did the pilgrims sit out in the open in the rainstorm? Why did the wild yaks not frighten them? Why did the wild yaks come to the circle of stones? Why did the wolves wait at a distance? Was there any connection? We may never know anything about all these events."

He continued, "What we do now know, because of old man Sangye and young Yeshe here, is that the herd of

wild yaks came down the slope behind this ridge. They seem to have come down the long slope behind Dirapuk. This is certain knowledge. We can try to find answers to these questions. Let us plan and let us go inside the valley and try to explore this region and see if there are any wild yaks, if they are very large, and if there are more of them. If we saw only male wild yaks at night, there must be others. There must be female wild yaks, and there must be young ones, and there must be herds inside these valleys. Let some of us go into the valley.”

Old man Dawa looked at Brother Tameng, and said, “We should explore the valley. Who will go? It may take days or weeks to travel inside and return. Will Master Rinchen permit you to go away from the Choku monastery? I am keen to go inside. My life is spent, and there is nothing more for me to do. I would like to seek the truth of the incidents that have happened. We need to plan.”

The monks from Choku and Dirapuk looked at each other, and at a gesture from the other, Brother Tameng spoke, “My brother monk and myself, we have discussed this issue. We will need to consult with our seniors and elders before we move out of the *kora* area. You are free to go. You and old man Sangye can plan the details. We will provide you with whatever support you need. That would be of no problem. We can also organize a chain of

support, to move food and goods to you if you keep setting up camp sites that we can recognize.”

Sangye nodded in agreement, bowed to Brother Tameng and said, “Masters, it is correct that you advise us about going in to this mysterious valley at the earliest. We will need your help, guidance and support in being able to stay inside the valley for many days if required. The small settlement of Dirapuk would not be of enough help. You may need to get help from Darchen and Shiquanhe also. I will go, with my grandson, Yeshe, if his parents would permit, and old man Dawa and the young lad, Norbu.”

The monk from Dirapuk interrupted, “Take Norbu, but do not take him too far. We have not informed his parents. Let him return after a day’s journey. We will get two others to be ready to return with him to join you. Let Norbu be the one who would always return to Dirapuk and go back into the valley to provide you with goods and supplies. He has two yaks, and his Mastiff will give him courage. When he returns, I will get some men from the monastery to take mules and yaks and dogs to go with him. They can help set up an advance camp at a day’s journey.”

Dawa and Sangye agreed with the wisdom and the plan. It would be necessary to make sure that they would not be trapped inside the valley if it would rain or snow suddenly. Nobody would know the locations. The people from the Dirapuk area were used to traveling in this habitat and terrain. They could take care of themselves while helping others. Yeshe looked at his parents, who were standing nearby. His eyes asked the question. His mother came up to him and patted him and nodded her

permission. She was proud of her son, and knew that this was a god-sent opportunity for the boy to learn from the old man.

“What about you, Brother Tameng?” asked Dawa, “You were the most curious and most strong in this search. You wanted to find out about the reason why those twelve pilgrims were sitting out in the open *kora* area. If you would have just stayed back at Choku because of the rainstorm, we would not have known about the herd of large wild yaks and we would not be here, planning to go inside the valley. Would you not come with us?”

Brother Tameng smiled, and replied, “Old man, you are right. My heart says that I should go with you, and move about in the valley. But I would need my Master’s permission. I will also need to send word to Darchen and other monasteries to organize supplies for you. Who knows how many days you would need to be inside those high terrain and forests? Who knows what’s out there? I will also try to join up with you. I want to talk to some of the pilgrim guide operators and take good alpine tents, sleeping bags and other supplies from them. We will need them as we go higher, or stay longer, if we have to.”

“But, I also need to return to Choku, because I fear for what we are about to do,” he said, and continued, “I fear that this valley could be a *Beyul*, one of the hidden valleys of peace and refuge, of our way of life, of the way of the Buddha in Tibet. This valley may be one of the lesser known of the 108 valleys that are known and listed as *Beyul*. Or, this could be one of the unknown ones, and may be one of those that are spoken rarely. I will need to consult with Master Rinchen. We will also

send word out to all other monasteries. There may be scrolls or records with us or others.”

Yeshe and Norbu had never heard of a *Beyul*. The old man Sangye had heard of these hidden valleys that were protected by the spirits and by the hidden records to prevent them from being damaged or destroyed. It was usually forbidden to establish houses or to do farming or take animals for grazing in these valleys. He nodded, to himself, thinking, that if nobody had ever gone inside, and if this valley was indeed quite long, it could be also be an unknown old glacier that may have retreated in some portions.

The monk from Dirapuk explained for the benefit of Yeshe, his parents and Norbu. He said, “There are many unknown and hidden valleys in these sacred lands. Some are known about, and we know that they are unknown. Some are not known, for they are deep within prohibited areas, and we do not know that they are *Beyul*. The locations of such ones are hidden within the verses written in secret scrolls and may have been forgotten. Some reason may have caused them to be kept a secret, and with passing generations, we may have forgotten that such and such scroll holds such and such secret.”

“However, this place, the valley around the *Kang Renpoche*, and with the number of monasteries in this area, it would be difficult to forget such a place,” he added, “It could be known to our elders and they may not have related the scroll to this exact valley. Let us stay back and find out. Let Dawa and Sangye, Yeshe and Norbu, travel inside the valley. We will make our enquiries. If this valley would indeed be a *Beyul*, we would need to convey and submit the necessary prayers

and conduct the necessary rituals to seek permission for us to enter and disturb the spirits that would be resident inside.”

Brother Tameng spoke, “Yes. We have to be careful. What we saw were incidents that we do not understand. Let us not forget the wolves. They are the natural predators of the wild yaks and yet they did not seem to harm them. It may be because they are the wiser since the yaks were quite large and fearsome. The wolves may consider us, our homebred yaks and our mules and our dogs as easy prey. This long valley could also be an old glacier that has broken up at various locations over hundreds of years. We should be careful.”

Sangye sent Yeshe and Norbu to start organizing the animals and supplies. Yeshe’s father went inside their store and began to pick out supplies that would last more than a week for the entire group. He had two alpine tents that he had been given to him by an expedition team from Norway. They had visited the Dirapuk eatery and stayed with them during a *kora*. They did not want to carry the heavy tents with them since they would be driving back to Kathmandu and flying back to Norway. He had taught Yeshe to open the tents and use them, to ensure that the cloth did not start rotting if left inside the packages. These tents would be useful today, he thought, everything happens for a purpose, and the most enlightened one must have sent the expedition from Norway to give him these tents.

There were two sacks of dried out charcoal that had been made for specific use in these high altitudes. This was his reserve supply from Shiquanhe and Ngari, for the days that he could get trapped in a snowstorm or

avalanche if it hit these parts. These two sacks of charcoal would be useful to Yeshe and his grandfather. He would send word to his cousin at Shiquanhe and pass on a list of requirements. The goods could be with him inside of a week, if the weather held. He could be the person to stay here, and make sure that his father, and his son, both who were very precious to him, would return safely.

The two monks left the tented eatery, and began to walk back to their monasteries. Old man Dawa walked with Brother Tameng for a distance, and returned. Yeshe and Norbu were busy getting the animals and supplies paired off in a sensible manner. Sangye went to get his Mastiffs. The dogs would be useful to warn them of the wolves and to give them courage. The monk from the Dirapuk monastery spoke to some helpers to send across prayer clothes and a prayer wheel as blessings for the team. Yeshe's mother walked out of the tented eatery, and looked quietly at the peaks of the *Kang Renpoche* mountain, and prostrated on the ground, in deep reverence, and prayed with all her heart, for the blessings of the most enlightened one, for her son, for his grandfather, for old man Dawa and for the young Norbu, their animals and their dogs.

Sangye looked at the young Norbu and his grandson, Yeshe. He knew that their youth would help them in this search into the unknown and unexplored valley. Old man Dawa would also be able to travel with the group. He was happy. This is how he would have wanted his life to shape up, to be in search of the great unknown of the mysterious mountains of the greater Himalayas in Tibet. It would be a group that could stay inside the valley for many days or weeks. They would need to plan in that manner, he thought, for who knew what was out there.

They were ready to move within the hour. Sangye had paired up with Yeshe, while Dawa was with Norbu. They would ride out on Sangye's chosen horses. He had picked them from his knowledge of their strength, courage and loyalty to him. They would never bolt from danger and they were used to moving about on higher terrain. Four yaks were chosen. All four animals were with black hair, for there were other yaks that were white, pied and brown. Sangye wanted all the four yaks to look true to the wild breed. He did not want the other domestic yaks to stand out in the wild habitat and in the mysterious valley.

Yeshe and Norbu moved out the four horses and yaks. The three mastiffs walked out behind them. Sangye and Dawa said a silent prayer, looking up at the great *Kang Renpoche* peak and waved out to Yeshe's parents. The local pilgrim guides, yak-boys and other helpers came to greet the team. The word had gone out to everyone in Dirapuk that the monks from the two monasteries had asked Sangye and Dawa to go inside the unknown valley in search of a sacred place, that had several holy spirits and gods. They were to go and return with unknown

treasures that the holy gods had left hidden within these valleys.

The monk from the Dirapuk monastery returned to meet the group and asked them to stand together, for he would recite a prayer to seek the permission of the gods and sacred spirits, to allow them to enter the hidden valley and let them know the secrets that were within. He spoke to the four of them, after the prayer, and instructed, “These are areas that we do not know about. Brother Tameng has gone to consult with Master Rinchen if anything is known about this particular valley. We will also send word to the other valleys and try to find out any knowledge that is known or heard earlier or written in the various religious books.”

“Since we do not know about the place, I have just now spoken a prayer to the guardian spirits of these mountains around Dirapuk, to permit us to travel within. Let us wait sign of any type or from anyone that may suggest that we should not enter. If there is no inauspicious sign, you may proceed ahead. I have also brought prayer clothes and sacred stones for you to place at the entrance to the valley above the trail at Dirapuk. You will be the first to lay the stones to be used to construct an entrance to this mysterious valley.”

Sangye, Dawa, Yeshe and Norbu bowed in respect. The local pilgrim guides, the helpers from Darchen and the yak-boys joined the group and bowed low in respect to the prayer and the rendition that the monk had made to the good spirits of the mountains around Dirapuk. The monk continued, “All those gathered here. You are the fortunate devotees today. Immediately after our friends and brothers enter the valley, you will all join in the

construction of the entrance that the monks will lead from Choku and Dirapuk. If my Brother Tameng does not return in time, we will leave a corner of the entrance, for him to install.”

This was a traditional practice, for the devout to establish a stupa-like entrance structure, made of loosely held stones from the location. The entrance would be invested with the strength of the gods and spirits and it would allow those who would pass through the opening to be blessed. The oldest such entrance in the valley was the well-known Yam-Dwar (*the entrance of Yama, the God of Death*) near Darchen. Sangye and Dawa stepped up on the trail and laid the stones for the first two corners, while the monk from the Dirapuk monastery placed the third corner. Yeshe placed a stone to connect the stones of Sangye and the monk, while Norbu placed a stone to connect the stones of Sangye and Dawa. Yeshe’s parents placed the next two stones followed by the locals.

The group of four crossed the stones that signified the sacred entrance that had been installed across the trail. They looked back towards Yeshe’s parents, the locals and the monk, and waved. They looked up at the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain and bowed in respect and reverence. As if in mutual consent, they walked along their horses. Yeshe and Norbu’s horses following the yaks, while Sangye and Dawa led from the front. The three mastiffs ran back and forth, wondering about the fuss and being generally happy about everything.

The trail seemed to climb initially away from Dirapuk and entered a riverbed that was covered by extremely large boulders. This could have been the reason why

people had not dared enter the valley, thought Sangye. So, where had the wild yaks walked in from, if the valley entrance was totally blocked by the boulders? There had to be an entrance somewhere, he thought. The four of them spread out, searching for a way through the large stones. The yaks were tied some stones along with the horses. The mastiffs were also asked to stay near the animals.

Old man Dawa wondered if this was the end of their search. There did not seem to be any possible entrance amongst the boulders. Yeshe and Norbu were getting impatient. They had been eager to go ahead, fast, inside the valley and meet up with the wild yaks. This huge landslide on the riverbed looked like a disaster for their search even before it had begun, thought Yeshe. Some of the boulders were ten to fifteen feet in height, and most looked like they were 4-5 tonnes in weight while all gaps and spaces between the large ones were stuffed with smaller ones, mud, old and dead trees, and bushes and grassy clumps that seemed like they had always existed in this place, for centuries.

There was absolutely no sign anywhere of any movement of animals. There was no trail of Chiru, or wild yaks or wolves. Strangely, there was no sign of any domestic yaks or horses having been brought up to these places to graze, though there was ample sign of grass and palatable bushes. The local sheperds and their goats and sheep did not seem to have discovered this place. How could such a location have remained undiscovered, thought Sangye. Was this place known to have evil spirits, he wondered?

Dawa and Sangye walked around, quietly, peering within and above and around the boulders. There did not seem to be any sign of boulders having been disturbed by the herd of large wild yaks that would have walked down this trail. Dawa looked for sign, some sign, that twelve large wild yaks would have left behind, accidentally or by the very size and weight of the animals. The entire area was stony. The trail had stopped on either side of the rocky landslide. The rocky spread was about thirty metres wide, entirely blocking the valley, and seemed to be at least fifteen metres high. They could not see beyond the rock wall that blocked the entrance.

“There had to be another way through this wall,” said Sangye to Dawa, “Let us walk back for some distance, and look for a higher location. We could look for what we can see from above this rock wall. I will go back and climb any narrow trail that I can find. Let Yeshe and Norbu stay with the animals. You keep searching here. The wild yaks would not have had to squeeze through this wall. That goes against all aspects of animal behaviour. Think of the heavy rainstorm during the night. No animal, wild or domestic, would have risked a passage into the unknown. There has to be a trail in this maze. We are not able to see it.”

The sheer sides of the rock and the mountains alongside were almost like a box that had been filled up with stones. Strangely, thought Norbu, the yaks, horses and dogs were looking very peaceful. They did not seem to be disturbed in this location. Had they come to the right location? What if the herd of wild yaks had indeed moved up this valley, and been blocked off at this stonewall, and had actually returned back through

Dirapuk to walk through the Lhachu valley? It would mean that they had never come out of this unknown valley. He wondered if he should speak of his doubts to Dawa and Sangye.

He looked at the enthusiasm on Yeshe's face. He had seen the pride that Sangye had in starting on this search. Old man Dawa was very happy. They looked content, even if they were totally blocked. There was no sign of anger or exasperation. He would ask later, he told himself.

V

Shenshe wondered if he had heard right. The Sikh pilgrim from India, in search of answers to questions about his holy master, wanted to go to the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain and “explore”!!! Nobody went out there. He knew that. He did not bother much about the superstition or mythology about the mountain, but it was his job to maintain the peace and prevent any break down in law and order in this remote place. This pilgrim wanted to go on the mountain just because he could not sleep?

He was alone at Darchen today. Whom could he discuss this problem with? Perhaps he had not heard him correctly. After all, he did not know the language properly. Did he really say that he might want to walk up the mountain that all these pilgrims thought to be very

sacred? Should he stop him? Should he tell him not to go up the mountain? Shenshe wondered about the action he should take. Most yak-boys and other guides would listen to a policeman, he knew. It would be better to just frighten them and wait and watch.

Sardar Amarpal Singh sat down next to Shenshe and smiled at him in a very peaceful and happy manner. His smile and demeanor were very comforting. It was puzzling for Shenshe. This man wanted to disrupt the local customs and do something that could very well be illegal, and he was now sitting next to a policeman and smiling. Shenshe looked at the Buddhist monk from Nalanda and asked, “Brother, did your friend say that he wanted to walk on the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain? Did I hear him say that? Am I correct in understanding him?”

The monk from Nalanda smiled at the predicament of the Chinese policeman, and replied, “Do not worry. My Sikh brother is a devotee of the Sumeru Mountain. He will not do anything wrong and will not go against the practices of the *kora*. He has felt some pull from the sacred mountain. It was a strange night during the rainstorm. We do not know about what was happening out there. We are not tourists. These pilgrims who come here, to do the *kora*, are not tourists. We come here in reverence. We feel the pull. You see only a mountain. We see our very identity.”

“It is not about Tibetans who fled to India. It is not about Tibetans from various locations elsewhere who come here to do their pilgrimage around the *kora*. This sacred mountain is about several religions. We who come here do not come as tourists. Those of us who come from beyond Tibet, for us, this pilgrimage are a once in a

lifetime journey. We do not come here to doubt our religion. We come here, those of us who come as pilgrims, we come here to worship,” said the monk from Nalanda, “we do not come here to commit sacrilege. Trust us.”

Sardar Amarpal Singh spoke to the monk in Hindi, and he translated to Shenshe, and said, “My brother, my Sikh brother, tells me that I am mistaken and so are you. He says that he would go near the Sumeru Mountain, our *Kang Renpoche*, but he will not walk on it. He says that he does not know if he would want to walk on it. He does not know about what will happen. He felt the pull of the mountain. He says that it did not rain for a brief while on the peaks of the *Kang Renpoche* when it was raining all about. He saw the peak very clearly. He felt as though something happened out there. He wants to go nearby, but he does not know if he will change his mind, once he goes closer.”

The Sikh smiled again, and Shenshe was more confused than before. Why is this man smiling again? He has just now told the monk that he would perhaps commit sacrilege, and there he is, smiling again. He thought about what he could do. It was certainly not a clear crime to climb the mountain. It had been prohibited within the various religions through their respect and reverence for the very sacred mountain. If someone would go, there would be widespread condemnation. He knew that people spoke about those who did dare to go on their own, without telling anyone. But he had not heard of anyone who had returned. Did this Sikh pilgrim know that nobody returned?

The monk spoke again to Sardar Amarpal Singh upon Shenshe's insistence. He conveyed the policeman's worries and concern. They spoke for some time and the monk translated, "My brother tells me that he is not master of the future. He is here, on land that has never been understood by anyone earlier. He has come here in search of answers. This is his life. There is nothing else that he wants to do or achieve. There is nothing to go back to in India, if he does not get answers about his questions. He would rather go nearer to the sacred mountain, and wait."

The Sikh pilgrim spoke again to the monk, who repeated, "My brother would not wish to go to Tarboche or to the Yam-Dwar. He does not wish to go to walk on the *kora* trail. He will do it later. The group of pilgrims that we came with has gone ahead. My brother could not walk beyond Choku and became breathless. We returned from the monastery area and returned to Darchen to await the group of pilgrims who have gone ahead to complete the *kora*. He says that he would want to walk today to the Silung Gompa or to the Gyengtak Gompa, and stay there at night."

Shenshe replied, "Yes. I was wondering about what the two of you are doing alone here at Darchen. Pilgrims from India are not allowed to move around without a group. Your pilgrim guide will be held responsible for anything that you would do that could be condemned. I have no problem with your Sikh brother and his questions. I respect religion. I have my job also. I think it would be good for you to go to the Gyengtak Gompa. I know the monks there. I have stayed there. Its closer to the sacred mountain."

The three of them, Shenshe, Sardar Amarpal Singh and the monk from Nalanda stepped out of the tented eatery and looked up at the *Kang Renpoche* slopes. The Sikh pointed out to the peaks and identified them separately by name. He knew this terrain well, thought Shenshe. They spoke again to each other with respect, and the monk translated for Shenshe, "I have told my brother that you have recommended that we should go to the Gyengtak Gompa and that you know the monks there. He was happy about it. He says that it is a sign for him that he received instructions from one who has just turned up without him having to search for you."

"He has also one request, though," continued the monk, and said, "He wishes to ask if it would be possible for you, he says this, if it would be possible for you to come with us to the Gyengtak Gompa. He says this because you know the monks and he knows that we cannot go wandering about without our pilgrim group. The monks may not allow us to stay at the Gompa for fear of action by the police. He says this, not me. He says that if you are with him, he wants to see if you would stop him, when he will decide to go on the mountain, if it would call him. He wants to see if you have the power to stop him when the mountain will decide for him. He says this, not me."

Shenshe smiled. He liked this sort of an open challenge. At least this pilgrim was not trying to tell him any lies or bluff his way through. He was correct in asking Shenshe's help for nobody would help wandering pilgrims from the groups from India. It was about one night, and what could one night's damage do that the rainstorm had not already accomplished, he thought. Gyengtak Gompa was the closest to the *Kang Renpoche*

from the south, and was directly in the line of sight between Darchen and the Nandi Peak. It gave an awe-inspiring sight of the *Kang Renpoche* mountain peak and the Sikh pilgrim would perhaps be satisfied at the proximity.

The policeman spoke to the monk from Nalanda, "OK. I will come with you. Take two sherpa boys from the pilgrim group, and one yak. We will also take three horses for us. It would be wiser. You have been breathless earlier. Did you all not take any medicines with you? Look at your size and shapes. You two are not meant to walk these hills. Devotion is not the measurement of fitness to walk the *kora*. Why did you not hire horses? Let us go. I will get the local yak boys and horses to come with us. They will not disagree with me."

The monk from Nalanda turned to speak to the Sikh pilgrim. He and Shenshe saw a strange sight. Sardar Amarpal Singh was seated out there in the open, with his prayer beads, deep in meditation and apparently chanting some hymn. He was facing the sacred mountain, and was lost in prayer. The stranger aspect of the sight was not the Sikh, but it was the mastiffs nearby. They were crouching, very close to the ground, and growling. They were not growling in anger or in threat, but seemed to be very wary. Two yaks nearby were standing still, their tails up straight, in stiff alert postures, their heads up, and breathing out very large smoky bursts of air from their nostrils. Shenshe shivered at the sight, and was worried. There was something very different going on.

Master Rinchen greeted Brother Tameng as he returned to the Choku monastery. The local helpers and overnight pilgrims had begun to move around, and some pilgrims had started moving ahead towards Dirapuk. The local helpers at the monastery and old pilgrim guides and yak-boys at Choku gompa watched Brother Tameng curiously. They could realize that something was going on. These guides and yak-boys along with some horse-boys had made the Choku gompa as their campsite. They waited for pilgrims who started off from Darchen with much enthusiasm and later crashed due to breathlessness by the time they reached Choku.

These pilgrims would be offered help and support with yaks and horses at Choku and taken around through the Drolma La pass and ahead to Darchen. They could meet up with breathless pilgrims every day. They knew the Choku gompa in a familiar manner, since they had camped here for most of their lives and their fathers had done so before them, and their fathers before them. They participated in all the prayer sessions and attended the talks and festivals conducted by the monks. This was their world. They knew of nothing else. There were no newspapers, radio, TV or Internet or cellphones.

The pilgrim guides and helpers knew of only one truth during each pilgrim season. They kept coming every day, and they paid well. They did not mind hardships and, they were usually affectionate, curious and considerate to the local people. They had not known that Brother Tameng had gone out in the night during the rainstorm, but some of them had seen him return with old man Dawa. They had seen them rush out again towards the Dirapuk area. And now, Brother Tameng returned without Dawa. What was wrong?

Inside the monastery, Brother Tameng went straight to the statue of the Dharmakaya Amitabha Buddha and stood quietly in prayer. He shivered, wondering in amazement at the splendid turn of events and developments that had happened. The younger monk and Master Rinchen waited patiently. They had realized that the old man Dawa had not returned. Something must have happened. Brother Tameng completed his prayer and spoke to them and told them of the events that had taken place at Dirapuk. He spoke to them about Norbu, and of his two yaks and his mastiff pup, and of the great old horsman from Qinhai, Sangye, his grandson, Yeshe, and their eatery and the trail above.

He spoke about the manner in which old man Sangye had spotted the trail of the herd of wild yaks, and of how he too had been convinced that they were indeed very large animals. They had been convinced that the herd had come down from the valley above Dirapuk. Brother Tameng told Master Rinchen of how Sangye, Dawa, Yeshe and Norbu had decided to go ahead and enter the mysterious valley. Nobody knew anything about this valley. Nobody had entered the valley. He did not know why. But, he said, the team had taken yaks, horses and mastiffs, and had gone in.

Master Rinchen smiled at the number of events that had taken place. He spoke, affectionately, to Brother Tameng, and said, "You returned, inspite of your eagerness? You caused this chain of events to happen by your curiosity. And you did not go with them? You did not hear anything about the twelve pilgrims who were sitting out in the open *kora* through the rainstorm and through the night? Why did you not go with old man

Dawa into this mysterious valley? You could have sent someone back with a message to inform us.”

Brother Tameng bowed in happiness at the confidence and affection that the Master Rinchen had for him. He had told old man Dawa that he needed the Master’s permission to move inside the valley. He replied, “Master, I am utmost grateful for your appreciation. I wanted to go with them, inside the valley, and explore and search. But, I decided to allow them to go ahead, and wanted to talk to you and seek your permission. It is the valley and the manner of information that is available about it, that made me cautious. Nothing is known about the valley. The monks from Dirapuk do not know anything about it. Expert pilgrim guides and trackers and hunters do not know about this valley. They have not entered it. That aspect of the unknown made me wait.”

“Master, I am worried, frightened and fear about what we are about to do,” said Brother Tameng, looking up again and again at the serene face of the Dharmakaya Amitabha Buddha, “Nothing is known about the wild yaks, nothing is known about the manner of these pilgrims, where they came from or if they returned back to Darchen or went ahead to Dirapuk, and nothing is known about the valley where old man Sangye saw the trail, and has never been inside.”

“I fear that this valley could be one of the most sacred of all *Beyuls* of the *Kang Renpoche* area. I have not heard of this valley but we do know that there are many secrets in this place. Nobody at Dirapuk had even entered this valley to collect firewood or graze sheep or goats or go in for hunting or trapping. Why would such a large area nearby be unknown or not explored? Do we know

anything of this valley? Even the monks at Dirapuk said that they would have to enquire.”

Master Rinchen smiled, and replied, “Brother, do not worry or fear what we do not know. If it were for us to respect, worship or fear, we would have known about it. We are in this land of the Thousand Living Buddhas, we stay and pray everyday to the most revered Amitabha Buddha, we read from the words of the great Sakyamuni, we walk around in the lands that have been made holy by Avalokiteswara himself, the greatest of all. Why should we fear the unknown?”

“You go ahead and make plans to go back to my old friend Dawa. Do not leave him to his fate. He needs his strength and courage from you. I have never seen him happier in all these years that I have known him at our monastery. Get yourself organized. We have enough supplies here, and enough gear that has been stored by expeditions and pilgrim groups. Get alpine tents, sleeping bags and supplies for everyone and go back. You may have to stay in that valley for a long time.”

Brother Tameng bowed in gratitude and respect and went about getting organized. Master Rinchen turned to the younger monk, and instructed him to go ahead to the Chiu and Gyengtak gompas and find out if there was any knowledge or mention of scrolls retained in their prayer halls or premises about unknown valleys or *Beyuls* in the *kora* and in the region nearby. He also asked the younger monk to be cautious and restrained in what he would talk about in the other monasteries. He did not want to be the cause of any new superstition or panic.

Master Rinchen thought back about what he had known. There was mention of a sacred valley, near the sacred mountain, to its north. This he was sure of, and he knew that it had been spoken about very rarely. Over the years, it was hardly ever mentioned, except for referring to it as some sort of a paradise area, teeming with angels and sacred spirits. Since it was mentioned to be very close to the sacred mountain, over hundreds of years, it had come to be referred to as being above the *Kang Renpoche* mountain slopes. He knew that this was not correct. There would be scrolls or records somewhere in this region. It was not a mystery. It was only a forgotten secret, he said, to the younger monk.

Brother Tameng returned to the prayer hall with gear and supplies and began to organize the stuff and separate them. He had brought back two old pilgrim guides, horse-boys and yak-boys. Master Rinchen counted the group that the young monk was assembling together to return to the valley above Dirapuk. Two pilgrim guides, who had obviously been selected because of their skills in tracking and hunting, as they were well-known for these abilities, three horse-boys and three yak-boys. The Master knew these boys. They could survive the journey and would not get frightened. They would not run away from the young monk and would not desert him.

“Master, I seek your permission and blessings. These good people have agreed to come with me to the valley. I have merely told them that old man Dawa is in search of a herd of wild yaks and wolves that came out during the rainstorm and that I am keen to participate in the adventure,” said Brother Tameng, “I fear however, the fact that those strange pilgrims who sat at the circle of stones, and disappeared later, were not frightened at the

sight of the herd of large wild yaks and at the strange behaviour of the wolves following them. The wild yaks came up to them and stood near them, and looked at them. Did they expect this to happen? Did the mysterious pilgrims come here to meet the wild yaks? What should I do when I come to the herd of wild yaks in the mysterious valley above Dirapuk?"

Vijay Kulkarni looked at his two partners, Himanshu and Paramita, and repeated, "I want to go to the Mount Kailash area. I want to change our plans to survey the Manasarovar Lake area. Do you want to come with me? I felt as if there was something out there, and that something or somebody was talking to me. You know, at the human level, we exist, and we do our work. But this was really something else. I felt like there was something else out there yesterday, at night, in the storm."

Paramita laughed, and hushed herself soon enough on seeing Vijay's irritated look. He was serious, she knew, about going to Mount Kailash. However, there were other problems. She spoke to Vijay, in a serious note, "Vijay Sir, I would also like to go to Mount Kailash immediately. But you will put the entire tour group to risk. We are here as tourists. Not as scientists or research teams. We are here with this group to do our first reconnaissance in this area. We cannot leave this group. We need to go around the Manasarovar Lake, and then go ahead to the

Mount Kailash area for the parikrama, when this group goes to that area.”

Vijay knew of the legal implications. He did not want to risk his opportunity to return to the area with other groups to search for hydrogeological clues to the reason why so many rivers started from this mythical and magical mountain. Why should so many rivers start only from this mountain? Why could they not have started from somewhere else? So much of Asia, so many countries of South Asia, not forgetting Tibet, depended on the Mount Kailash. He wanted to very desperately pick up several rock samples without making anyone upset. If the initial results did show any good information, he could always request permission to return on a detailed study.

Himanshu would know the manner of risks that one could play out now, since they were so close to the Manasarovar Lake and the Mount Kailash area. He was an experienced field scientist and would know what could be done and what should not be risked. He looked at Himanshu, and said, “Dada, we have to do something. What happened out there during the storm may not be there tomorrow. We are from India, and you and me, we know that there are gods and demons everywhere. We have more Gods within our religions and belief systems than all the other religions put together. And, we are here. At Mount Kailash. Should we wait for two more days?”

“Wait. You should wait. Whatever may have happened out on the Peak, you and me, we cannot risk the entire group. For most of them, this is their one-in-a-lifetime opportunity and we can always return, and we will, I

believe. The others, in this group, they have staked their entire lifetime savings, their pension and their strength and good health to come here. We cannot throw that away for our curiosity,” replied Himanshu, “These mysteries have been here for thousands of years. Nothing is lost if you do not discover it today. Relax.”

Paramita and one of the Sherpa boys had begun to pack up the tents and other equipment. The tour group had three large trucks and a fleet of land-cruisers. Luckily, Vijay thought to himself, they had one land cruiser for themselves, as all others had four tour members each. The Sherpa boy with them had become a good friend, while the Tibetan driver of the land cruiser usually kept humming songs to himself. He did not understand English or Hindi and the Sherpa boy usually translated instructions or enquiries.

Vijay helped with the packing up, and kept chatting with Himanshu, “You know, I really did feel something from there. It was like some individual energy, directed right at me. I sensed it so very clearly. But, I cannot explain it in any logical manner. That is more irritating than the fact that we are not going there immediately. I have gone to more mysterious places than this in India. I can usually sense the bunkum from the real, the mystical from the made-up. This did not come from any godman or temple or hymn or mantra or tantra. I got the feeling of energy directly from the peak, from Mount Kailash. Go ahead, laugh at me and I will not get angry with you.”

“There was some sense of reality to it all,” continued Vijay, pointing at the peak. The sun had come out strongly, and the three of them could see the Nandi Peak

and the Mount Kailash peak. It was absolutely resplendent and there was a very wholesome feeling of calm to the mountain. They could feel that they were experiencing a very satisfying perspective, just by watching the peak. It felt extremely real. The feeling or the perspective was just a sense of calm, and they kept looking at the peak until the Sherpa helper-boy called out to them, breaking their trance.

The tour group was ready to drive around the Manasarovar Lake. This parikrama would be done on the Land Cruisers, while they would be on foot around Mount Kailash. Himanshu had wanted to study the soil and rock samples around the Manasarovar Lake and compare them with the ones that they would pick up around Rakshas Tal, and the Kailash area. They got into their land cruiser with the Sherpa boy and the Tibetan driver.

Their first stop was to be in the area between the Rakshas Tal and the Manasarovar Lake. The drive would take them past Parkha and they would go ahead to their first stop at Chiu Gompa, on the banks of the Manasarovar Lake. It was to be a spectacular spot, and they would love it, the Tibetan driver had kept reassuring them again and again. The Sherpa-boy translated for him, “He says that you can wash your sins here also. All Indians can get instant blessings here. There is a small junior river Ganga here, called *Ganga Chu*. This is a connector river between the Rakshas Tal and the Manasarovar Lake. It is below the Chiu Gompa.”

They had smiled politely at the implied joke, and Vijay had playfully thumped the Tibetan driver on the

shoulder. The driver looked happy that he had pulled this joke on yet another group from India. He did it to each group that came to start the Manasarovar *kora*. These pilgrims from India are very lazy, he thought to himself, for how could you even want to do the *kora* on vehicle. One should do it very respectfully on foot, he would repeat to each Sherpa-boy or other drivers.

The vehicles stopped at the Chiu Gompa and the pilgrims walked around. Vijay, Himanshu and Paramita climbed to the roof of the monastery and stood quietly, looking at the awesome expanse of the Manasarovar Lake on one side, and the sight of the Mount Kailash peak, extremely clear, and without clouds. Paramita kept taking photographs “by the hundreds”, as she termed it. Vijay rushed them through, “Come on, come on, and there is no waiting here. We need to go down and walk to some distance away from the group. Remember, we have to make it to the Serka Khim area, near this Gompa, and get samples from the ancient gold mining area.”

They rushed out of the monastery. Vijay had friends in the other groups who were part of the pilgrimage. He knew that they would take all the photographs that they could and more. He did not want to use up his time in taking photographs of the area. This was perhaps the most remote pilgrimage area, and perhaps had the most number of photographs per square kilometer, he joked, to Himanshu and Paramita. They walked out to the banks of the Manasarovar Lake, pretending to enjoy the view. The Sherpa-boy accompanied them, explaining that this area was also known as the *Ngava Ngopodupuk*. He could not explain the reason, but Vijay knew about it and was not keen on asking the boy about it.

The Sherpa boy was bored with them and ran back to the pilgrim group at the Gompa, knowing that he could perhaps get some good food, from one of the trucks. Vijay turned towards Serka Khim, and they walked up into the marshy lands, away from the banks of the Lake. These marshy lands seemed to be like a mosaic of small grassy mounds of earth, interspersed with slush, stones and bare fallow land. Vijay stood quiet, while Himanshu and Paramita walked on ahead. Vijay was watching the area between Serka Khim and Changjagang, on the banks of the Lake. Something was just not correct, he kept telling himself. This cannot be happening.

He was a young boy, perhaps sixteen or seventeen, sitting within the marsh, just where it ended, looking out into the Manasarovar Lake. What was strange, he thought, for he could not be sure, was that the boy did not seem to have any clothes on him. He had some sort of a hat, or a helmet, something like from an army soldier. He seemed to have some sort of metal shirt on his chest and back. He could not be sure entirely, because the light shone off the boy, from against the sheer shine of the waters of the lake. He looked very peaceful. He seemed to be holding something in his right hand. Was he meditating here? Suddenly, there seemed to be a gentle spread of a halo-like glow near the boy, and it was gone, and the boy was no longer sitting at the spot near the Lake.

It was quite a distance from Darchen to Shiquanhe. Why would the two pilgrims leave their other companions on the *kora* and return? That would not be allowed for Indian pilgrims. The local police would have kept track and the pilgrim guides would have immediately informed about it to the local government officials or police officers. Nobody kept track of the many hundreds of pilgrims who came from all over Tibet, and usually it would not have been noticed, thought Luo Tsering. These two pilgrims had been noticed because of the rainstorm.

What was this big mixture of languages? India seemed to be like China, he thought. These people from a very small region in India spoke in several different languages. It must be quite significant for them to have been disturbed about the two pilgrims though they looked like all other Tibetans. Now that they had pointed them out separately, Luo could see that they were not Tibetan. They were fairer, and taller, and had much cleaner clothes. As Maharaj pointed out, “Those clothes have been made to look dirty.”

“Back home at Navsari, we hardly get to speak to the priests of the Parsis during their prayers inside their temple. We meet them only when they sit at our neighbourhood *Pol*, at the shop that sells sandalwood and other oils and material for prayers and rituals,” said the Pilgrim Guide, who also doubled up as a spiritual guide to the pilgrims who accompanied him from Gujarat, “These pilgrims are speaking that most difficult dialect in a very comfortable manner. They do not seem to be from India.”

Maharaj decided to take matters in his hands, and approached the two pilgrims, and said in his pidgin Tibetan-Chinese, “Greetings, my brothers. Have you had any breakfast? I noticed that you did not take any. The night was very bad, and it looks like it would rain again in some moments. You may not be able to travel out there. Have some food, special food for pilgrims like you, who look like you have traveled all the way from India.”

The two pilgrims looked up startled at Maharaj having approached them. They understood what he had said, for they nodded in agreement. They did not speak, but approached the hot stove and accepted the hot breakfast, sat down quietly and began to eat. They did not eat the food, as an Indian from the Navsari region of Gujarat would have done. These two pilgrims had not washed their hands, and had sat down to pick at their food by using the fingers of both hands. No devout Indian, especially from Gujarat, would have used the left hand, unless he was left-handed, thought Maharaj. These two, he declared in Hindi to the Jain monk and the pilgrim guide, these two were definitely not from India.

Maharaj and Luo sat in front of the two mysterious pilgrims and looked at them. Luo spoke to them in Tibetan, “Brothers, it is not that we are curious, but it is because that we are worried that we ask. There is enough trouble nowadays in Tibet and the policemen will come later and talk to me and maybe, they may not allow me to run my business here for the coming seasons. I need to ask you, for these pilgrims here, from India, feel that you have returned to Shiquanhe from Darchen, without the rest of your group.”

The two pilgrims stopped eating, and sat silently. They did not look at each other. Maharaj pointed at the food on their plates and gestured that they could continue to eat. Silently, he added some more food on their plates for fear that they should presume that they would not be allowed to eat unless they answered questions. That would not do, thought Maharaj, for he could never push away people from the food that he served them. They began to eat again, slower this time.

Luo sat patiently. Waiting. Maharaj sat nearby. The pilgrim guide and the Jain monk sat with the other pilgrims at some distance. The two mysterious pilgrims ate slowly. Once, one of them looked pleadingly at Maharaj who immediately served them another complete helping. Luo asked again, “Brothers, please do realize what I am asking of you. You do not seem Tibetan. The monk from India, he who is sitting there with the other pilgrims there, told us that you were seen at Darchen with twelve other pilgrims. And that you speak a very strange language.”

The elder of the two spoke, in fluent Tibetan, “My friend, we thank you for your hospitality. We did not know that you were concerned and that the pilgrim brothers had seen us at Darchen yesterday. We took a lift with one of the trucks that this pilgrim group had with them, and the Tibetan driver had helped us come away from the predicted rainstorm at Darchen. I thank you and your cook from India. This food was very tasty. We have never eaten these foods before.”

“Never eaten these?” asked Maharaj, “But the Jain monk in the group said that he could be very sure that you spoke Parsi. Actually he said that you spoke old Parsi.

Who speaks that language in Tibet? Nobody. And now, you say you have never eaten Indian food? And you speak very good Tibetan. They also said that you came away from the Darchen area without the others in your group that had been moving around in the *kora*. They saw that you had walked all the way to Tarboche earlier.”

The elder pilgrim replied, “My friend, there is nothing to fear from us. We are like anyone else. I am only surprised that the pilgrim brother from India recognized our ancient language. We speak Tibetan freely, but we also retain our ancient language. We are happy and pleased that some of our brothers are in India. We did not know that. We returned from Darchen because we go to return to our place. Our group will return later.”

“We are Tibetan now. We live in Tibet,” he continued, “We come in pilgrimage. Our group will complete the *kora* and they will return later. We have done the *kora* earlier. I have done it twice. My brother, sitting here with me, has done it once. We came to get our group to the *kora*. There is nothing wrong about us and there is nothing suspicious about our actions. For us, the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain is most sacred. More sacred than for any of you.”

The Jain monk and the pilgrim guide had come to sit near and were listening. Maharaj translated the discussion for their benefit and explained what was being told to them. The Jain monk smiled and said, “Come on, that is not correct. I am a Jain, and for us this is the location of the *Ashtapada* Mountain. The legend of the mountain is the oldest of all, even earlier than Shiva, and the other stories of Buddhism. Yet, all religions

coexist here in peace. For all, this mountain and the region is the most sacred of all, in our religions. How do you say that this is more sacred?"

The elder pilgrim smiled, and replied, "Peace be with you, Master. We bow to you, and to the legend of the *Ashtapada* Mountain. We are at peace with all religions. We are from a very ancient religion, and of a very ancient people. You would not understand about our religion and about our way of life. We come from villages to the west of the Ngari town, deep in the mountains that have never been visited by tourists, scientists, governments or armies. We live in peace there. But for us, this region is the home of our most ancient gods. The mountains are the homes of our gods and we come to visit them."

The two pilgrims accepted the hot cups of spiced-up sugary tea that Maharaj handed around. The elder pilgrim continued, "We are more curious about the fact that our ancient language is still spoken in other parts of the world. We live in seclusion, having come to Tibet from an ancient spiritual land to the west. We keep our customs, and we live in our small world. Every three years, some of us, our priests and the monks among us, are selected to travel to this sacred ground. We visit this place and return. That's all. We are like all pilgrims here. We have done the *kora* earlier and we are returning."

The Jain monk said, "A land to the west of Ngari and Tibet? And you speak the ancient Pharsi language. You must have come from Iran like all the other Parsis. Are you also a Parsi? You are certainly fairer than the Tibetans. That is most amazing. I should tell my friends back at Navsari. They will be very happy. But I did not

understand the fact that these mountains are more sacred to you than they are to others.” The elder pilgrim replied, “Master, there are more secrets here than what you know or what you have heard about. This region has more secrets than there are stories and myths about the mountains. You know of only sacred spirits and gods and demons. For us, these mountains, people, animals and the waters hold more secrets than the stories.”

The sight of moving shadows of dusk climbing up the peaks of *Kang Renpoche* Mountain was swallowing it. The dark shadows came much early today than during the days of the past month. It must have been due to the leftover storm clouds over the region, thought the young monk at the Dirapuk Gompa. It had been a strange day that had followed the rainstorm. He had returned from the eatery run by Yeshe’s parents and was thinking of the group that had entered the mysterious valley that could be a *Beyul*, a sacred and hidden area.

He wondered about the turn of events. The other monks had discussed the developments and were sitting near him. They looked at the mountains outside the windows of the monastery. The young monk spoke to them about the enthusiasm of Brother Tameng from Choku, the energy of the old man Dawa, the youthful courage of Norbu and Yeshe, and the loyalty of Sangye, the great old horseman from Qinhai. These were the different peoples of the *kora*, along with people like Yeshe’s

parents, the yak-boys, the horse-boys, the helper-women at the various eateries and boys from Darchen and Shiquanhe and other places who came here, each year, to help the pilgrims who came from many different countries.

Did anyone really know about the many mysteries and magical stories of the *Kailash Kora*, the mountain peaks of *Kang Renpoche* and the awesome diversity of dimensions across the region to the Manasarovar and Rakshas Lakes? The senior monk at Dirapuk was worried about the location and discovery of the mysterious valley, very nearby and yet totally unknown. Could it be a *Beyul*? What should one think about the herd of large wild yaks?

One of the younger monks had worked in Nepal and had read many books in Science and especially Biology, before he had discovered the fact that the search for pure knowledge was more fulfilling and more supreme. He had left a good career in science in Nepal and had been accepted by the senior Masters of Dirapuk and their Drukpa Centre in Nepal. He had come to Dirapuk after five years in Bhutan. The scientist-turned-monk offered a brief submission, “Masters, and brothers, there is nothing strange about the herd of large wild-yaks. It is possible that an entire group of wild yaks would have stayed trapped inside these higher valleys for centuries. They would have obviously become very different from the other wild yaks.”

The senior Monk asked, “Young brother, can it really be possible? That isolated animal groups would become different if not able to meet other animal groups? How can that be possible? Does that happen to humans? That

is indeed strange. Magical are the ways of the rules of existence. There is so much more to learn. Can it be possible that this could be true? Can it be such a simple answer to such a mysterious question?"

The young monk who had discussed with Brother Tameng about the sightings of the wild yaks, wolves and the twelve pilgrims, said, "It may be so. The wild yaks could have become different from other wild yaks. But why would they walk during the rainstorm? Would it not be wiser for such a group to hide inside their own territory? And Brother Tameng said that it was very clear that the entire herd of large wild yaks were male, extremely large, and almost equal in size to one another. Where have we ever seen a herd of wild yaks that were all male and equal in size? That is very strange."

"Also, it is the mystery of the herd of the large wild yaks walking through the rainstorm and coming to a standing halt in front of the twelve pilgrims. Why would they do that? Did Brother Tameng really see what he saw? I thought at first that he could have been mistaken. But old man Dawa was with him. He knows this region and he knows the pilgrims, and he knows the wild animals of the mountains. He will not make such a mistake," said the young monk, "And, what about the wolves? Why would they accompany or stand near the herd of large wild yaks? They would follow them from a distance, and they would be only one or two at any time. Brother Tameng said that they saw almost as many wolves as there were the numbers of large wild yaks. And why did the group of pilgrims not get frightened by the wild yaks and wolves?"

The assembled monks nodded in agreement. They had heard of stranger stories from the mountains but not one as mysterious as this one. And this was not a story, thought the senior Monk. It had really happened, and only within the past twenty-four hours. He thought about the turn of events, quietly, watching the changing shadows of the mountain peaks. Sometimes, it seemed like a huge monkey was about to catch the moon, while at other times it seemed like a dragon had been swallowed up in one gulp by the mountains. The shadows came in all shapes over the mountains.

He came to a decision, and said, “Brothers, we have heard what was said to us by our brother. I know Brother Tameng and Master Rinchen. They are not lunatics or of those whose mind suddenly starts to travel these great distances across the mountains. There are those whose minds have traveled back to more than four or five centuries, and there are those who say that as they sit in meditation on the *kora*, they can feel that five to six spirits also sat with them in prayer, lending their strength to each other.”

“We will keep a watch on the valley tonight. I want two brothers to take separate locations on the valley. Get some good pilgrim guides or sherpas to help you sit through the night, fearlessly. I need not say that anything can happen. Take your prayer beads and if you want, the spinning prayer-drum. Use the tents that are already in place. Do not construct or borrow any other tent. Do not go to sleep. Just keep a watch over the valley. It would be very helpful and will help us decide if what happened yesterday, at midnight, will repeat itself tonight.”

“I will focus on the *Beyul*. There must be mention somewhere. It cannot be this close and stay unknown in myth or religion. How could this valley have been hidden away for so many centuries and especially when the mouth of the valley opens into the most crowded location in the Ngari province? Do you know that there are small cities in India or Nepal that have more people than the entire Ngari prefecture? And yet, this valley is the most crowded. Why did the herd of large wild yaks chose to walk down this valley, together, in the stormy night.”

The young Monk replied, “Master, as Brother Tameng of Choku mentioned, it was Master Rinchen who picked up on one point. That was the fact that the twelve pilgrims who sat out there in the circle of stones did not get frightened. It seemed like they were expecting the wild yaks to meet them at that place. Is it strange? We have so many domestic yaks carrying supplies and goods through the kora. Could it be that the pilgrims thought that the herd was consisting of large domestic yaks? It was dark, and raining heavily. They could have been mistaken?”

The senior Monk commented, “I agree. If it was so, why did we not see or spot them in the daytime? Where did the twelve pilgrims go? Did they foolishly attempt to climb the inner *kora* or attempt to climb the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain? No. It could not be such a simple explanation. If one would try to climb the unknown peak, he would attempt it in the daylight hours. Why would they try to do so at night, during a rainstorm?”

The two monks chosen to sit it out in the valley requested permission of the senior Monk to leave the

monastery premises and stay out through the night. The young monk who had befriended Brother Tameng went up to the windows of the monastery and looked at the *Kang Renpoche* mountain peak. What was out there? Why were people not allowed to climb the mountain? Could it be that the twelve pilgrims came here to the *kora* and waited somewhere for a stormy night? Why would they do that? Have these pilgrims foolishly tried to climb the mountain?

The young monk continued to play with his thoughts. Those twelve pilgrims knew why they chose to sit it out on the circle of stones. They knew that they would have to sit through the rainstorm. The wild yaks did not frighten them. Was there something out on the slopes of the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain? Did the wild yaks, wolves and the pilgrims walk up the Mountain and disappear? Or did they walk down to the Manasarovar Lake and kept walking away from the tourists and pilgrims at Darchen and at the lakes? It had been said that mountains keep their secrets efficiently. If you want to share in them, you had to ask them politely or through prayers.

